Toaru Majutsu no Index NT Volume11

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New Testament
Toaru Majutsu no Index 11

"Come to think of it, that was the intersection where I first met 'him.'"

Shokuhou Misaki first ran across Kamijou Touma long before the white nun in charge of so many grimoires fled the world of magic and fell from the sky.

Even now, Shokuhou Misaki remembers that pointy-haired boy.

At first, she thought it was some new form of hitting on girls.

One time, he saw her in her swimsuit.

One time, she hit his head with her bag.

One time, she experienced an indirect kiss.

And finally, he saved her life.

That was a strong contender for the happiest period of her life. They are precious memoires for Mental Out, the strongest mental esper.

The story that will look back on her memories begins now.

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新約 とある魔術の禁書目録(インデックス)⑪

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Kamachi Kazuma

Today, I went as far as a certain train station and took a photo near the taxi stand. The guardrail suddenly began to bend like a race circuit. The story is set in a large city, so I am very interested in things that define the flow of traffic.

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Heavy Object Series (8 Books Total)
The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village 1~4
A Simple Survey
A Simple Monitoring
The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage
The Unexplored Summon://Blood-Sign

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

新約

とある魔術の禁書目録

インデックス

11

鎌池和馬

イラスト／
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"I will now be using you completely and utterly for my own benefit."
Academy City's #5 Level 5, Mental Out
Shokuhou Misaki

"Hey, you lazy Zashiki Warashi. What is this Hi no Enma thing anyway?"

"I suppose you could call it a Japanese succubus. It's counted as a blood-sucking monster, but it's actually an enemy of Buddhism. In other words, it's a female Youkai that uses her charm to get in the way of asceticism."

"Oh, a succubus, you say? I see, I see. A succubus!? You mean like the one in a micro-bikini living in our attic !?"

"Don't act like that, Shinobu. It's disturbing. And I believe this kind destroys the victim's family as well."

"That's why I'm so mad!!"

"But I wonder how they worked the Hi no Enma into the criminal Package. Especially into a Package to attract all the girls around you."

"It sounds ridiculous, but it's no laughing matter. The market toward people who want to be popular is huge. In a broad sense, it covers fashion. In a deeper sense,

there's plastic surgery. And if you want to get into the shadier stuff, there's the power stones you can buy on the internet. If you include love songs and movies that virtually fulfill that desire, it might be the biggest market in the world."

"But the Hi no Enma is a female Youkai and primarily messes with male ascetics."

"You mean it wouldn't make girls fall for people like this Package does?"

"That's right. And I might have called it a blood-sucking monster, but it can't turn other people into its own kind like a vampire."

"So did they use that fact to create a Package that creates more Hi no Enmas? That is, the target girls are made identical to the Japanese succubus?"

"Made identical? You mean instead of having the Hi no Enma attack them, the targets are drawn in by doing the same thing as it?"

"Hi no Enma… Japanese succubus… Enemy of Buddhism… Interferes with asceticism… Sucks blood… Hm? Wait."

"What is it?"

"You say it's a blood-sucking monster, but what's the definition of blood here?"

"Human blood, of course. I doubt it counts if they eat a rare veal steak."

"But what if anything counts as long as it's human blood. There's more than just A, B, AB, and O. There's also artificial blood."

"Shinobu, you don't mean…"

"And calling it artificial blood is a bit of an exaggeration. It's nothing more than a few minerals and electrolytes added to saline. In that case, we've already seen the artificial blood they've been spreading around."

"Those sports drinks and oral rehydration fluid."

"This popularity Package turns the girls who drink those things into succubi and makes them obey your will . But it's nothing to worry about now that we know the trick. C'mon, let's go unmask them!"

Prologue: A Certain Entrance — No.05_Open.

"They've really developed this restaurant's broadcast ability," muttered Shokuhou Misaki.

She was one of Academy City's seven and Tokiwadai Middle School's two Level 5s. Her long legs were wrapped in stockings with spider web embroidery and those legs dangled down near a stool's support column. The amber polished counter reflected the doll-like features of her small face and her long, honey-blonde hair. People found it hard to believe her proportions were those of a middle school girl and those proportions seductively pushed out the blazer of her Tokiwadai winter uniform from within. She impolitely rested her elbows on the counter and turned her bored eyes toward the flat screen monitor installed over the employee's head.

In the old days, it had been common for professional baseball games or horse races to play at ramen shops or set meal restaurants, but that was technically against the law. That led to a demand for programming that store and restaurant televisions could play without relying on

TV broadcasts. However, the spread of those had only accelerated people's trend away from television, so there really was no winning in that business.

(Is that a magnetically controlled monitor? Instead of RGB colors, they use CMYK. I've heard they don't produce blue light and can display resolutions higher than 4K8K for things like art museum and art introduction shows, but they tragically never caught on because the broadcast signals couldn't keep up.)

If they had a screen like that here, she guessed someone in the restaurant loved gadgets.

At any rate, what did a truly high-class girl eat?

There were a variety of answers, but Shokuhou Misaki never touched any of the foods in convenience stores or family restaurants that would list a single vague ingredient such as "Salisbury steak". On the other hand, living solely off of high-class French food requiring a reservation seemed even cheaper and felt like something a steak-loving middle-aged man would do.

"Sorry about the wait. There is your cheeseburger, French fries, seven veggie salad, and orange juice. Is onion dressing okay?"

"Thank you"

"We will prepare a mini custard pudding pie for your dessert."

"Please do."

She smiled and looked down at the tray on the counter .

It all looked like the foods found at fast food restaurants the world over and none of it was particularly expensive. Nevertheless, she had a good reason for choosing this as the ultimate luxury.

Beef bowls, hamburgers, hot dogs, rice balls, sandwiches, ramen, curry rice, sodas, and ice cream.

Those were the main draw of countless restaurants across Japan, but *what if they were made naturally delicious by a natural professional using natural ingredients*? This restaurant was the answer. The ingredients were kept cheap, so there was no major risk. But at the same time, the restaurant did not raise their prices solely to improve their image. The façade of fancy words was thrown aside and they made something anyone would want if they

knew just how difficult it was to naturally enjoy what was natural.

Restaurants like this were hidden around Academy City and only those who knew the list could avoid the many landmines and enjoy these natural foods on a daily basis. In Academy City's case, most restaurants used cloned meat and vegetables grown inside farming buildings, so finding natural ingredients better than that was a high hurdle indeed. The bottles of water and café desserts Shokuhou ate on a daily basis were also hidden masterpieces buried on the shelves.

However, there may have been another, completely different reason why she ate those natural things so often .

Even among specialists, opinions were divided on why people developed preferences in food. One theory said there was a deep bond between the sense of taste and memories. Liking the taste of your mother's cooking was proof of growing up in a happy household. Conversely, a child who was always lonely with both parents at work would associate the flavor of

ready-made convenience store meals with those negative memories. What this theory said about disgusting prison food went without saying.

People often said their tastes changed when they grew up, but that could be interpreted as overcoming their unpleasant memories as time went on.

"Chomp♪"

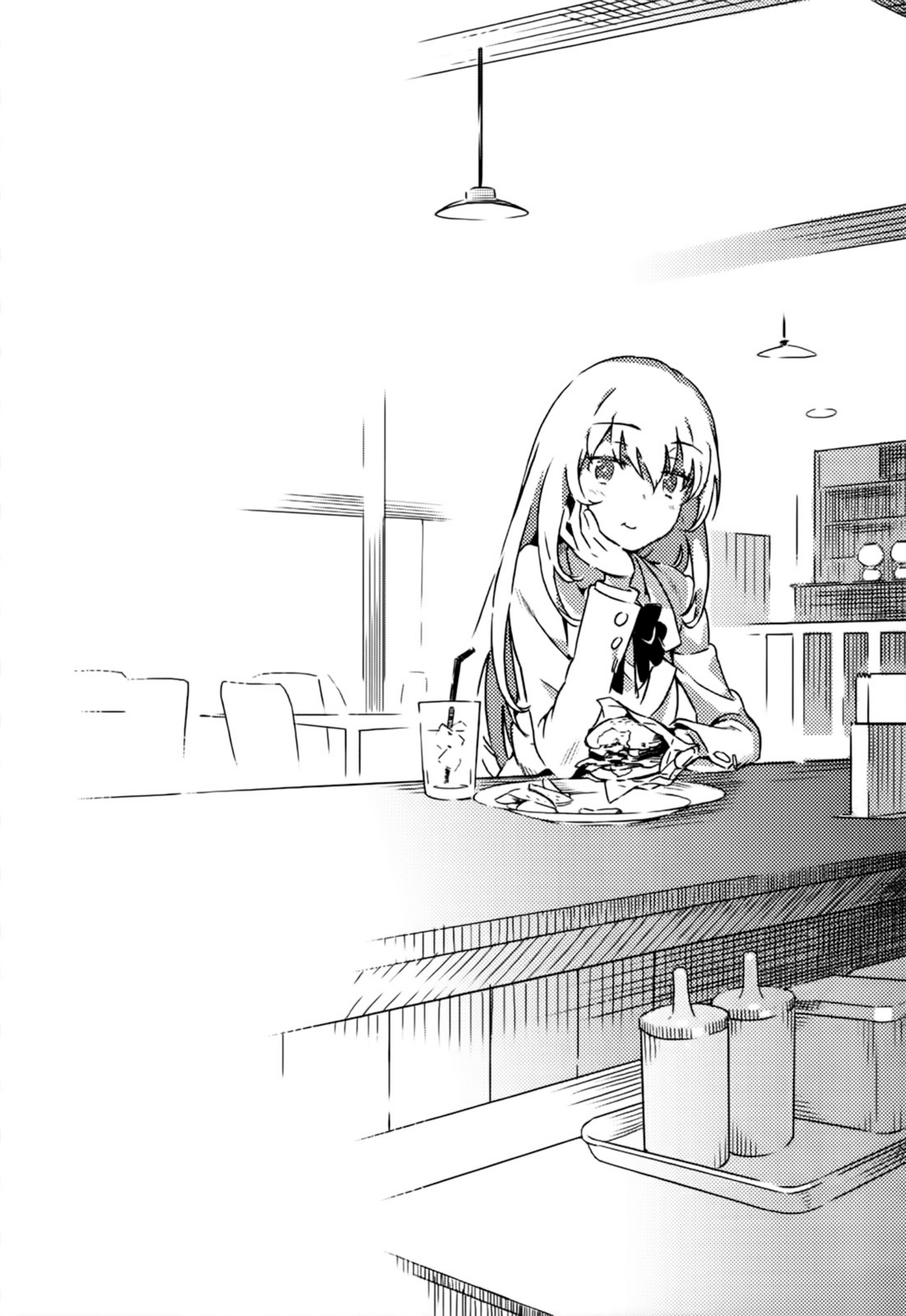
Shokuhou Misaki grabbed a large paper napkin from the counter, wrapped it around the cheeseburger, and accomplished the miraculous task of elegantly eating that handheld food which was much larger than her small mouth. One look at the hint of relaxation around her eyes was enough to see that something comfortable had come to mind when she tasted that combination of juicy meat, melted cheese, crisp lettuce, sliced tomato, and spices kept subtle enough to not overpower those other traits.

She was naturally enjoying this natural thing.

There was no need to get excited and she did not let her high-class world take this from her.

(Come to think of it…)

With the giant cheeseburger in one hand, she looked to the side.



This was an area primarily targeted toward university students and the first floor of this building contained a convenience store. But from the second story window, she could see a small intersection.

(That's the intersection where I first met *him*, isn't it?)

Those two people with no previous connection had bumped into each other there.

Their paths had crossed.

It was not a particularly beautiful location and it had not been the kind of lovely meeting seen in dramas.

However, it had been a special event for the girl named Shokuhou Misaki.

Even if it had all come to an end and their paths would never cross again, it had been important enough to strongly influence what had happened to her from then on.

Shokuhou Misaki still remembered even now.

That was when she had first met the pointy-haired boy named Kamijou Touma.

That time in August of the previous year was a strong contender for the happiest period of her life.

Chapter 1: Reminiscence >> Front Hall — Episode _“the_Girl”.

Part 1

When she thought back on the entire incident, the first time Shokuhou Misaki had run into Kamijou Touma could easily be called a false start.

That was oftentimes how reality worked.

“Kyah!?”

“S-sorry!!”

The loud cries of cicadas and the great heat of midsummer filled a completely ordinary intersection in a completely ordinary district.

When a pointy-haired boy ran against the flow of people and crashed into Shokuhou Misaki, *a short and slender girl who was still developing*, the contents of their bags audibly scattered all over the asphalt. Her brand new stationary and other items newly bought after entering middle school went everywhere.

The boy who had run into her was most likely two or three years older than her.

He crouched down until he was practically on all fours while quickly gathering up all of her belongings and pressing them into her arms.

“I’m really sorry, but I’m in a hurry. You aren’t hurt, are you? Bye!”

“Eh? What? Wait!!”

She did not even have time to get angry.

The pointy-haired boy ran off with his belongings in his arms and the crosswalk’s green light began to flash. On top of that, she was honked at by an emergency vehicle from an emergency response service that had recently made a name for itself as a “civilian” ambulance.

She decided it would be stupid to turn back in pursuit of that intruder and have to wait through another full light cycle, so she quickly made her way across the road.

“Huh?”

She found an unfamiliar object mixed in with the belongings in her arms.

It was a cheap cellphone.

The screen was locked with a password, so she could not even try to find the owner’s name. However, there was no need to do that. She knew whose it was without looking into it.

One of the boy’s possessions had gotten mixed in with hers.

She turned around, but a stream of cars blocked her since the light had changed and the pointy-haired boy was nowhere to be seen on the road past that.

“What am I supposed to do about this?”

She had no real obligation to return it and hunting him down sounded like a real pain.

However, she felt she needed to at least hand it over to Anti-Skill or Judgment later.

Even if it was cheap, an electronic device seemed different from a pencil or an eraser. She was hesitant to just throw it away, so she was unsure what to do with it.

“If this is a new trick for hitting on girls, then it’s quite something.”

That was all she said before leaving the intersection.

That meeting had surely been nothing but a false start and it had been completely meaningless.

In fact, she did not even count it as a meeting.

In that case, Academy City’s #5 had to have experienced another meeting that did hold great meaning.

That second chance meeting was the one that held real value for Shokuhou Misaki and Kamijou Touma.

Part 2

It had not been until several days after crashing into each other in the intersection that things had truly been set in motion.

There may have been signs from well before that, but this was the day and the time that held great meaning for Shokuhou Misaki.

She had not wanted to meet anyone.

During an oppressively hot night, she had staggered through the familiar student areas and continually made her way as far from any other people as she could. She always chose the quieter and emptier direction. As she did so, she crossed into another district, left the asphalt and concrete scenery, and entered a winding mountain trail surrounded by the trees of a dark forest. This was District 21. The mountainous region had a rare amount of preserved nature for an urban center like Academy City. It was filled with observatories and valuable water resources such as dams or artificial lakes.

But even then, she kept moving.

She could not accept it.

She walked on and on without end and ultimately found herself at the peak of one of the few mountains. There she found a circular artificial lake with a diameter of over fifty meters.

Something like a metal tower rose from the center of the lake and the lake’s edges were entirely made of concrete. From space, it may have looked like some strange ruins, but it was actually an experimental geothermal power station that stuck a heat conducting rod one thousand meters down into the earth.

The sun had already set and the moon was out.

It was far past her dorm’s curfew, so the dorm manager and the like were probably causing an uproar.

But Shokuhou Misaki had grown sick of “all that”.

“Ahh, ahh.”

Still in the brand new summer uniform of a first year in middle school, she collapsed onto her back next to the

perfect circle of the artificial lake. No one else was around, so she spread out her limbs despite her short skirt.

One could perhaps call it giving into temptation, but she pulled a TV remote from her handbag and toyed with it in her hand. She spun it around like a gunman in a western and “a little thought” began to grow larger and larger inside her head. It was just like frozen moisture wrapping around the dust in the air to form a large snow crystal.

She had already settled the issue involving a giant **** to increase **** which was very important to her.

The related incident involving a **** named Dolly who had lived hidden in a tall building was also over for the moment, as much as she hated to admit it. Enough time had passed since then for her emotions to cool.

And that may have been the reason why.

Was she finally relaxing or had she grown lax?

It was at this moment, when some time had passed after all of her immediate problems had been dealt with, that her heart fell into a decayed state much like an

overly serious freshman growing depressed shortly after starting school. She was an esper who could control people’s minds, so some might have found it strange for her to fall victim to this kind of thing, but she had not had many opportunities to use her powers on her own mind.

And this may have been one of those opportunities.

“I don’t know if you call this my weariness ability or what, but I’m just sick of it all.”

Sick of memories.

Sick of relationships.

Sick of everything like that.

She stopped spinning the TV remote and pressed it against her own temple, just like she was committing suicide with a handgun.

She was one of the few Level 5s among the 2.3 million residents of Academy City, so it was not unusual for her to be used for the benefit of the adults, in experiments, or

as part of some sort of conspiracy. And during the intense time spent dealing with those conspiracies, she had not had time to think about this sort of thing.

If, during one of those times, she had seen herself now, she might have angrily grabbed the remote and eliminated that self-indulgent denial of people’s bonds even if it meant altering her personality.

But that was why one could say she had given into temptation.

She had grown lax and let her guard down.

Otherwise, she would never have said what she did.

“Why not reset everything inside my head? Would that free me from all these heavy thoughts?”

Speaking it aloud may have been an imprinting ritual meant to convince herself of what she was saying.

It would be a simple task.

So very, very simple.

She only had to move her thumb and press the button on the remote pressed to her temple. That would immediately activate Mental Out, history’s strongest mental esper power, and reset all of her memories. She would not regain all that time and nothing would physically change, but she would definitely return to being “innocent” in a certain way.

She felt like something was holding her thumb back, but the desire to escape the strange weight in her heart was stronger.

Her thumb twitched and her powers were about to activate.

But in that very moment, something else happened.

“Huh? What are you doing here?”

She heard a male voice

She first thought a worker at the geothermal power station was out patrolling the area, but the voice was far too young for that. She concluded it must be a student

who had ignored the no entry signs like she had, but she could not work up the willpower to sit up and speak with him.

“What does it matter?”

“I really don’t think you should be doing that.”

“What, are you with Judgment?”

“No, but…”

“Then what does it matter?”

“Oh, uh… But I really don’t think you should be doing that. I guess it’s not really my place, though.”

He sounded terribly indecisive.

She questioned whether this was some new method of hitting on girls, but he spoke again before she could sit up and see what he looked like.

“I mean… When you’re lying all sprawled out like that , I can see right up your skirt from over here. You should really cover up.”

……
……
……

For an instant – truly just an instant – her entire face grew beet red from the tip of her nose to the edge of her ears, but as a gorgeous and elegant lady, she did not do anything as unseemly as frantically reach out to hold her skirt down.

Instead, she sat up as slowly and silently as the shimmering heat, removed the TV remote from her temple, and pointed it at the boy standing a short distance away.

“*Erase his memories*!!” she shouted.

Her thumb moved and the pointy-haired head swayed . Mental Out never failed, so the memory of what color of flower garden was inside her skirt had been banished to eternal darkness.

Or so she thought.

“?”

The boy grew unsteady on his feet as if feeling faint, so he slowly shook his head *while holding his head with his right hand*.

"Hm? I get that you're embarrassed, but why would you think that would erase someone's memories?" he said with a dazed look on his face. "*And I don't know who you think's interested in you and that flat chest of yours*, but I won't tell anyone, so just stand up already."

"What!?"

He showed no sign of having lost the memory.

If anything, he was adding to it.

Just to be sure, she asked a question.

"I-incidentally, can you remind me what I'm wearing today?"

"What's with that spider web pattern? Have you thought about something more your age? And does that even cover up the important bits?"

"Erase!!"

But no matter how many times she tried, nothing came of it. It was an endless spiral of memory erasure → dizziness → right hand to the head → confused look.

After the failure of the powers she had absolute faith in and what seemed like a tremendous obsession with her panties, Shokuhou Misaki threw aside her ladylike aura and let out a shout.

“I’ve erased your memories thirty-eight times now, so why are your eyes still glued to my underwear!? Just how great is your pervert ability!?”

“Hm? Wait. Don’t tell me you really have a power like that! That’s a bit of an overreaction to some panties, don’t you think!?”

A puzzled look came over her as she watched the pointy-haired boy hurriedly move back. She felt like she recognized him from somewhere.

“You’re the guy who ran into me at the intersection with toast in his mouth.”

“I did not have toast in my mouth. Come to think of it, that means you’re the one that brought my phone to Anti-Skill. Thanks for that.”

She grew suspicious as he pulled the cheap cellphone from his pocket and waved it a little.

“So was all of this some new way of hitting on girls?”

“Oh, I get it now. That’s Tokiwadai’s uniform, isn’t it? I’ve run into a painfully self-conscious little lady, haven’t I?”

Part 3

The current Shokuhou Misaki laughed without meaning to.

As she did, the large breasts swelling out from within her winter uniform shook.

She had finished eating and started back toward her student dorm in the School Garden, but she had naturally chosen to use the underground mall’s heated corridor.

The reason she liked the underground mall may have been because its spider web of intricate passageways reminded her of the unreal feeling of a labyrinth in a picture book. She enjoyed the ethereal feeling of not knowing where she was or which direction she was facing despite being in familiar territory, but she also recalled what had happened “back then”.

That had been a terrible meeting.

But in her depraved state of mind at the time (which thinking back was a despicable and spoiled way to act), it had been like a perfect-score shot in the arm.

There were times when fancy and by-the-book words would not reach you.

There were also times when you would harshly reject anything just because it came from your parents or teachers.

Sometimes a gag manga or comedian’s skit that adults mocked as meaningless and worthless could bring life back to a weakened heart. And the fact that Shokuhou Misaki had made it this far without resetting her memories was surely due to that horrible meeting.

But for better or for worse, that had been nothing more than a meeting.

The two had not even learned each other’s names.

It was here that they had learned that and that he had made some kind of definite connection with her.

This underground mall had been the stage for that.

Part 4

It was apparently known as the Summer City Flood Prevention Program.

“Uuh… What is with this?”

Academy City District 7 was a city of asphalt and concrete that could be called Shokuhou Misaki’s home ground and she was currently standing there *wearing her school’s designated racing swimsuit*. This was the summer of her first year in middle school, so the swimsuit was almost brand new.

Simply put, this event used the city for disaster training.

It was a large-scale test period to ensure the underground mall’s drainage equipment worked and the emergency shutters could withstand the water pressure.

The spider web of underground passageways and some of the aboveground roads were *intentionally flooded* by guiding river water into them after passing it through water purification equipment. That was the basic outline of the event.

This essentially turned all the city’s shortcuts into flowing pools and the students swam all around with their wallets and stationery in waterproof bags.

“Let’s play with this! If we dive with it, it’s gotta be fun!!”

“Eh? What’s so great about a radio-controlled submarine?”

“You’ll see once you dive!”

Small children were running around and shouting in excitement.

Whether it was the ocean, a river, or a pool, teenage students would go nuts as long as they had a body of

water on a hot day, so this event had latched onto their hearts and would not let go. Or at the very least, no one complained about it.

Except for the small minority like Shokuhou Misaki, that is.

(Uuh… I had to wear my swimsuit because I’m not about to reveal my pathetic lack of ability by saying I can ’t swim at my age, but what do I do now?)

She could move from one end of the city to the other without entering the underground mall, but the underground passageways were best if she wanted to take the shortest route that avoided the really long red lights at the main roads and the railroad crossings.

Also, the air-conditioned underground passageways that protected her from the hot sun were an urban oasis for people like her.

(It’s 38 degrees out here. I’m not going to melt like ice cream before getting back to the dorm, am I?)

But now that she had made a show of wearing her swimsuit, she did not want to use the trains or busses. She was not going to be quite that welcoming to the molesters of the world.

On this day of summer break, simply heading out to the store had turned into this living hell. Unlike the girls excitedly running to the stairs down to the underground mall while carrying floats and beach balls, Shokuhou alone felt dark as if she were in a reverse spotlight.

That was when she heard footsteps.

Despite the crowds around her, these footsteps sounded oddly loud in her ears.

“Huh? What are you doing drooping down in the middle of the street? You don’t have heatstroke, do you? ”

“You’re the guy who ran into me at the intersection with toast in his mouth and then tried to hit on me at the mountain peak.”

“The name’s Kamijou Touma, golden girl.”

"I am the great Shokuhou Misaki!!"

That young lady of Tokiwadai Middle School immediately shouted back in an all-out rejection because she feared having that weird nickname stick with her forever.

"Shokuhou? That sounds like it's spelled with some crazy characters. And why are you wilting like that? Are you lost?"

"You just insist on mocking me, don't you? Could you leave me alone? I was having a bad enough time simply having to walk back to my dorm through the incredibly hot sun at two in the afternoon."

"Eh? Why would you do that? Just use the underground passageways. They've turned into air-conditioned flowing pools so they'll feel almost too cold."

"Kh!?"

Her shoulders jumped more than necessary.

"And if you aren't going to head underground, why are you walking around in a swimsuit in the first place?"

This was not good.

She would rather die than let it out that she was walking around in the swimsuit to show off despite not being able to swim. Yet saying she was going around town in a swimsuit for no reason would just make her a pervert.

This was really, really bad.

“Ho…ho ho ho. What are you talking about? I was just about to head down there with plenty of ability to spare!! ”

“I have no idea why you sound so defiant, but why don’t you get going?”

“I will!”

“Okay.”

“I really, really will!!”

“Okay? Why do I feel déjà vu? Is it just me or is this a lot like the lead up to entering a boiling bath?”

Shokuhou Misaki trudged off toward the stairs to the underground mall like she was preparing to commit suicide. She hesitantly turned back on the way, but the mystery pointy-haired boy named Kamijou Touma was still giving her a skeptical look. She favorably interpreted that as her hips simply being too attractive for her own good, but she did not stop. She could not stop now.

“…”

The rectangular entrance leading underground showed a stairway that was flooded partway down, but it looked like a giant monster’s maw to her.

A raw chill ran from the inside of her legs to the back of her neck, but her hyper high-class aura refused to let her give up.

(It’s…)

She moved hesitantly but gathered strength in her gut so those around her would not notice. As she did, she heard the cries of playing elementary school children who easily ran down the stairs past her and into the labyrinthine pool below.

“This water gun’s amazing! It really is!! Look!!”

“Ah, wait for me!”

Meanwhile, Shokuhou Misaki quietly clenched her teeth and tried to motivate herself.

(It’s okay. Even those children can laugh and play here ! It doesn’t matter if you can’t swim! The water isn’t five meters deep or anything. You can walk along the corridor like normal and reach the exit like normal. Normal human ability is more than enough here.)

But whatever she said on the surface, she was more than panicked, so she overlooked a small fact.

One child lagging behind the passing group gave a shout of “Wait for me!”

And a moment later, that slower child crashed into her back.

Without even time to scream, her face produced a tremendous splash as it broke through the water’s surface.

In all seriousness, fear for her life filled her entire being.

Under the water, everything sparkled brightly and she could not even tell which way was up.

“C-cough!?”

She flailed her limbs around, but that did not help. She was like a hamster running and running in its wheel. Meanwhile, the oxygen inside her body was converted into something else and a strange heat wrapped around her mind.

“Oh, honestly!!”

She thought she heard a voice and a large clump of air bubbles burst into the water nearby. It grabbed her slender flailing arm and dragged her up to the surface.

It was the pointy-haired boy named Kamijou Touma.

“Cough! Cough!!”

He shouted at the (self-proclaimed) beautiful girl from close range as she coughed.

“The water isn’t even a meter deep here!! Are you the kind of person that causes problems for the part-time lifeguard by drowning in a kiddie pool!?”

“Sh-shut up.”

The group of kids, including the one who had run into her, was nervously looking their way from a short distance away. Shokuhou should have been the victim here, so why did she feel so guilty?

“And if you can’t swim, that’s fine. Why are you getting so angry and charging in here? But if you’re really not feeling well, I can call a civilian ambulance.”

“I said shut up!!”

She shouted in desperation with her face completely red and even the very top of her head soaking wet, but then she grabbed onto Kamijou Touma’s arm.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Hmph. What’s so great about being able to float in water? Do you really have to swim the breaststroke like a frog to be a winner in life!? If people who live on land hadn’t forced themselves to invent these techniques of

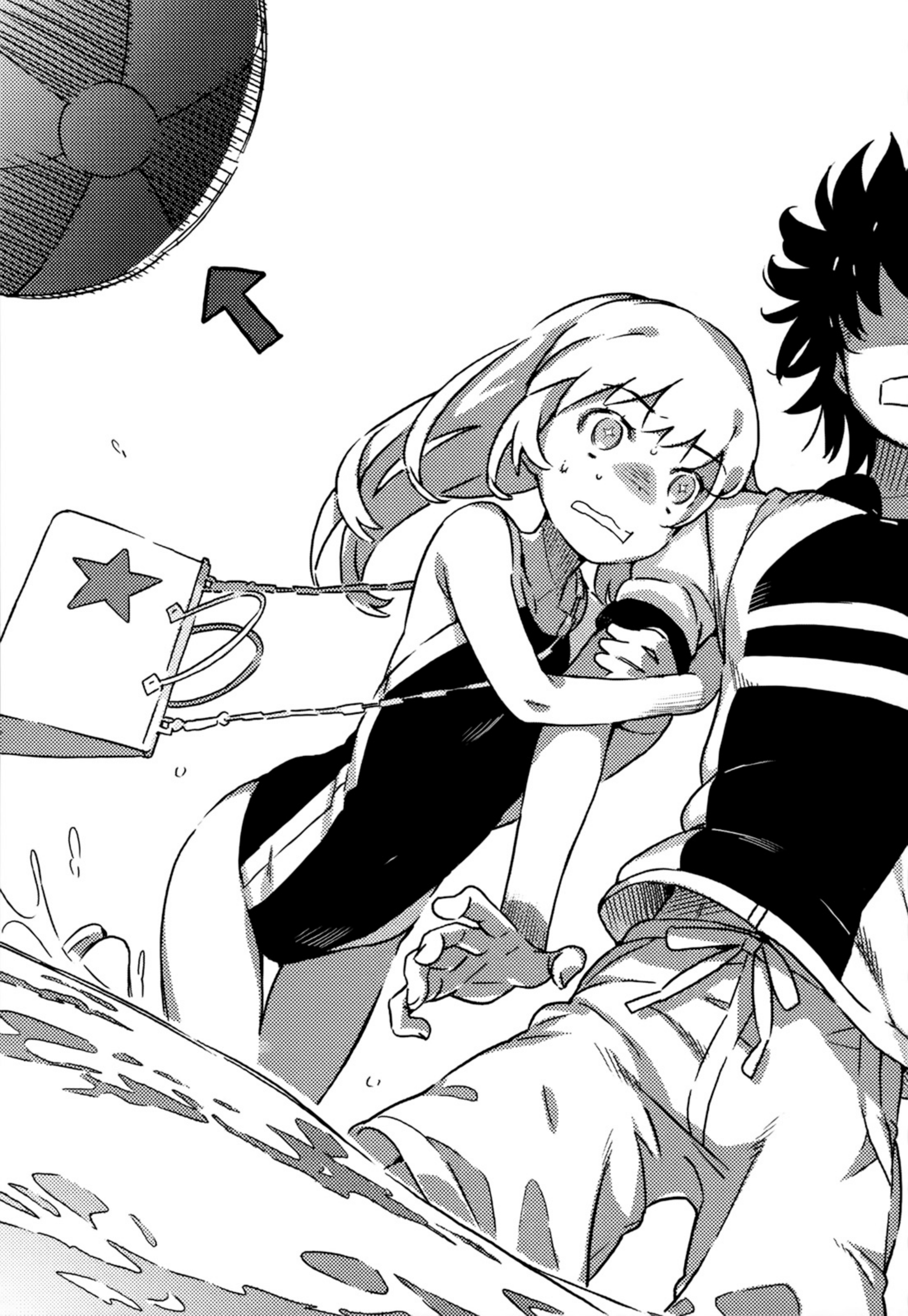
moving through the water, people like me wouldn’t be stuck having to pretend!”

“But what does any of that have to do with grabbing my arm!?”

“Now that it’s come to this, I have no choice but to bet my pride on travelling through this pool that used to be an underground mall. But I can’t let anyone see me relying on a float, so I need a more elegant alternative.”

Essentially, she was afraid the surrounding people would spread a rumor of Miss Shokuhou Misaki almost drowning in a pool less than a meter deep, so her desperate objective was to suppress that rumor with the image of her travelling through the pool without issue.

And instead of using her arms and kicking her legs to swim through the pool, she would elegantly walk through it while holding a boy’s arm.



However…

“They’re touching me! You’ve been pressing them up against my arm for a bit now!!”

“You really, really need to shut up! I have more important things to worry about!!”

“No matter how modest they might be, a girl’s breasts are still a girl’s breasts!”

“What did you- bgh!?”

Just as she began to snap back at him, a beach ball struck her square in the face.

A short distance away, a few girls in swimsuits were panicking at the wonderfully clean hit and Kamijou Touma’s words provided the finishing blow.

“Not again. This is just like the trouble you caused by not noticing that kid coming up behind you. It’s your fault for not seeing it coming from right in front of you. Does this go beyond swimming? Are you just hopelessly all-around unathletic?”

"Heh heh…heh heh heh heh heh. Heh heh heh heh heh

"I have a feeling I'm being casually forced to help with something awful."

"Hmph. You have the privilege of accompanying Mental Out Shokuhou Misaki, one of Academy City's Level 5s, so this will naturally be the highlight of your otherwise dreary summer break."

"Level 5?"

"That's right."

"Mental Out?"

"That's right! Do you have a problem with that!?"

"Y-you've gotta be kidding. But the rumors said the Level 5 with the greatest mental powers was a young woman with an amazing body!!"

"I am a young woman!! I have always been the most mature one in my class!"

But for some reason, Kamijou Touma gave her a kind look.

“Shokuhou-kun. Shokuhou Misaki-kun. Before, I may have said that, no matter how modest they might be, a girl’s breasts are still a girl’s breasts.”

“Wh-what about it?”

“Listen, little girl. When I refer to a young woman, I mean someone who manages a student dorm and has the tolerance to give anyone advice if they want it. And there is one thing you lack as far as that’s concerned. Do you know what that is, little girl?”

There was no way she could, so she gave him a confused look and he gave the answer.

“These common breasts of yours disqualify you from providing the support of a young woman. Give up and try again later.”

“What!!!???”

Part 5

The present Shokuhou Misaki held her head in her hands.

As a student at a girl's school, she did not have enough contact with boys to know what an average boy was like, but she still wondered if that pointy-haired one was one of the worst.

(Well…)

While reflecting on those stupid words, she lowered her gaze.

With an odd shaking sound effect, two large masses pushed out the chest of her winter uniform from within.

(It does look like I grew even more than necessary thanks to that)

She had met him a few more times around the city, but they had never exchanged cellphone addresses or anything like that.

They may have seen some special value in only ever meeting by chance.

And she had set up another personal rule: she never looked in his mind using Mental Out.

Why had she decided that?

She must have seen some special value in that as well.

She climbed the stairs and left the underground mall.

The chill of the late November air stabbed at her skin and she felt no hint of that summer heat.

She then walked along a large road for a while.

Perhaps due to limited land, all of the buildings in this area were quite tall, but there were occasional gaps.

One of those was a park entrance.

She suddenly stopped and turned to that entrance and the poles preventing cars from entering.

The casual remnants of memories could be found here and there and this park was one such place.

Part 6

One day, Shokuhou Misaki had found the pointy-haired boy sitting on a park bench. Whether it helped much or not, he had chosen a bench in the shade

to escape the heat. She wanted to say he was reading, but that may not have been quite right. He was looking through a notebook, but he held nothing to write with.

What was he doing?

Curious, she had asked and this was his reply.

“Hypnotism! I can get anyone to do what I say with this!!”

“Hypnotism?”

“That upperclassman sure is amazing. High school girls can do anything! They can ride motorcycles, work part-time, and casually answer anything you ask. Taking that step from middle school to high school really is amazing. She’s such an adult!!”

“What!? Are you trying to piss me off!?”

Shokuhou had only just entered the middle school zone this year, so she did not like the sound of that theory. It made her feel several levels behind.

But at the same time, she noticed the boy had mentioned asking this high school girl something. In that case…

(Hm. Could he be studying psychology to have more to talk with me about?)

He was way off the mark if that was the case, but why not help with his efforts?

She sat next to him and he continued with the notebook in hand.

“But doesn’t Academy City’s Curriculum use hypnotic suggestion?”

“Well, there are some kids who use abreaction, hypermnesia, self-hypnosis, and that sort of thing as triggers or safeties, but I seriously doubt that involves dangling a plastic pendulum from a string and waving it back and forth.”

“C’mon, just this once! I just want to try it out once! I’ll only try it a little!!”

“Fine, but if you succeed, it’s my turn. I’ll do to you what you did to me.”

Her warning would make him too afraid of her revenge to give any inappropriate orders.

With that in mind, she watched as he held a power stone pendulum in front of her eyes.

All the while, he was looking down at the notebook instead of her.

“Okay, here goes. Um… First, stare at the pendulum.”

(It would actually be pretty scary if this was enough to mess with someone’s mind. This is like performing surgery without knowing what you’re doing.)

She followed his instructions while working to keep her thoughts from showing on her face.

“But now a surprise attack!!”

He clapped his hands right in front of her face. There was in fact a way of inducing a hypnotic state with an unexpected action. For example, you could rub their back as they focused on the movements of your finger.

But it was hopeless when the method was this straightforward.

“Did it work?” he asked the surprised girl. “P-please relax.”

(Controlling people isn’t that easy!!)

“…”

She swallowed her thoughts and followed his instructions. She let her eyes glaze over and shoulders go limp. The pointy-haired idiot called out to her and waved his hand in front of her face to test her reactions, but he finally seemed to believe in his own power.

“It really worked. Amazing. That upperclassman’s notebook is real! She’s really something else to make a method even an amateur like me can use. High school girls can do anything! They really are adults!!”

(What!? Why is my effort improving his opinion of *that old woman*!?)

The middle school girl briefly contemplated throwing it all aside and attacking him head-on, but she decided ruining this would not be any fun and so continued her act. Now that Kamijou had gained the right to freely use another person, she wanted to see what kind of commands he would give this (self-proclaimed) beautiful girl.

"Um, okay. Time for the first command."

He looked down at the notebook titled "Kumokawa Seria's HypnotismNotebook".

And then he said it.

"You have a strong desire to stand up and lift your skirt in both hands."

"…!!!???"

She thought her heart would leap from her throat.

(He…he…he… He completely gave into his desires once he thought he'd succeeded, didn't he!?)

She began to tremble, but Kamijou did not seem to notice.

He looked at her face in confusion, tilted his head, and looked back down to the notebook.

"Odd. It's not working. But it says right here to test that first."

"…?"

Shokuhou moved just her eyes to glance down at the notebook sitting in his lap.

Someone had used a highlighter all over the page, but one area was emphasized more than the rest.

Embarrassment is an important parameter for showing a human's resistance. To check whether they are under your control or not, you first need to test a command that will cause great embarrassment. For example, you could ask them to lift their skirt.

(That girl is just making things up!!)

In fact, the false notebook was written to carry things in an obscene direction no matter what happened.

Most likely, that “upperclassman” had realized Shokuhou was involved once Kamijou made his request. In her jealousy, she had created this nonsense manual and given it to Kamijou. It was exactly the sort of method she would expect of “that old woman”.

Next time they met, she swore to control her with Mental Out, dress her in a risqué swimsuit, and have her put on a one-man samba carnival, but how to handle the current situation took priority.

“B-but this isn’t good. Wouldn’t it be bad if I hypnotized her but left her hanging like this!? Oh, damn. Is there a way to stop the hypnotism!? Like a purge switch or something!?”

What had he planned to do if this was real?

She grew more and more irritated as he flipped through page after page, but she realized she had bigger things to worry about.

Namely, the page his hand stopped on.

“Here it is! Let’s see, let’s see. Emergency hypnotism release. If the hypnotism fails, it could cause catastrophic

damage to their memories or personality, so do not hesitate for a second when performing this emergency release. However, shouting to them or slapping them won’t help. Their embarrassment is what is interfering with your commands, so you must increase that to its maximum.”

(Eh? Wait.)

“For example, by removing their panties.”

“Whaaa

That had not actually been the pointy-haired boy’s fault.

That “old woman” was at fault and he had simply been tricked into it.

It would have been something if he had understood what was going on and went along with it while playing the role of victim, but she doubted he was that crafty.

She was inside a chilly park covered in brown dried leaves. It must have been a common point between their spheres of activity because they had shared a few other memories there.

For example…

Part 8

Shokuhou Misaki could no longer hear the loud cicada cries.

There was a simple reason for that.

On that summer day, she was entirely covered in pigeons.

"…"

"Wahh, wahh, wahh!!"

The pointy-haired boy frantically swung his school bag around to drive away the fifty or so pigeons.

All of the popcorn in the cardboard container had already been wiped out and she had only managed to eat two or three pieces.

"I look away for just a second to get some drinks and this is what happens! What are you even doing!?"

"But…I… That wasn't my fault! I was the one attacked by the park pigeons!!"

"This goes beyond simply being unathletic."

"What!?"

"Why does it seem so familiar? Do you maybe have the same tendency for misfortune as me?"

"N-no, I don't. A perfect queen like me would never have that kind of negative ability displayed on her status screen!"

However, the boy fished through his bag with a pitying look in his eyes.

He pulled out a silver whistle in a plastic bag and handed it to the slender girl who still had feathers on her summer uniform and in her hair. It resembled the kind of whistle used for soccer matches and the like, but it had likely been customized for emergencies. She could use it to let people know where she was if she was stranded or buried alive.

“I got this in some kind of training, so take it. You need to have something like this with you at all times. I’d be worried otherwise.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Use it if you’re in trouble. It might give me more chances to save you.”

Once she took it “because he said to”, she realized she had already been pretty well tamed by him. She would never have admitted it, though.

(Honestly, this isn’t like putting a bell on a cat’s collar.)

Despite being a shiny silver, she found the whistle was made of plastic or something similar once she removed it from the bag. It was a cheap product with the silver painted on and it was probably worth less than one hundred yen, but the whistles had probably been handed out to all of the students at a school and thought of as a bargain if they would help at all.

She casually began to place it in her mouth, but then she froze.

(Wait. Given this thing’s secondhand ability, would this be an indirect kiss?)

Her face rapidly grew red, but Kamijou only yawned. She had a sudden urge to hit him, but she reconsidered it . He had handed it to her while it was still in the plastic bag. He had likely gotten it during some disaster training and then never used it. She was essentially being used as a garbage can here.

That irritated her a bit, but she relaxed and placed the whistle in her mouth.

“Will this thing really be any help?”

“Who knows. But it should be easier on the throat than screaming. I tried it out once and it was really loud.”

A horribly distorted whistle rang throughout the park.

The indirect kiss was an indirect kiss after all.

Part 9

The current Shokuhou Misaki sighed.

That whistle was still in her handbag.

She had never had need to use it, but she had found no reason to get rid of it either.

Ultimately, she had not rid herself of her lingering attachment to the point of cutting all ties.

This could be said of anyone, but there were discrepancies between who she wanted to be and who she really was.

And that boy was one of the few areas in which she was willing to admit that fact.

(Come to think of it…)

Inside that park which was nearly empty due to the cold, a certain girl’s face came to mind.

That girl was Misaka Mikoto.

She was a fellow student at Tokiwadai Middle School and Academy City’s #3 Level 5.

The two of them were like oil and water. In fact, they were barely comparable.

At any rate, she would always end up in an argument whenever she saw the girl.

(And these memories may be part of the reason I just can’t stand her.)

An older boy and a Tokiwadai lady.

Her special power did not work on him.

An indirect kiss.

The paths they had travelled down with that boy were similar on all counts. If it were not for the problem with his memories, Shokuhou might have been the one there.

She knew she should really give up, but she was also not about to stick the remote against her head again.

She had already cast aside the option of forgetting everything.

“What a pain.”

She cut across the nearly empty park and made her way outside the other exit with the short skirt of her winter uniform blowing a bit.

She walked further through the many tall buildings of the city.

Countless narrow alleys could be seen in the dim darkness between the buildings.

She suddenly stopped in front of one of those.

This was the place.

Not all of her memories with Kamijou Touma had been enjoyable ones. Some perfectly matched the atmosphere of dangerous darkness filling that narrow alleyway.

And this may have been yet another way that Misaka Mikoto had resembled Shokuhou’s own path with the boy.

Simply put, an incident had stood in her way and it would never have reached her had she not been a Level 5 .

And she had defied it along with that boy.

Part 10

“Pant pant!!”

Kamijou Touma panted like an exhausted stray dog as he ran through the hot Academy City night.

He was not alone. His hand held the hand of Shokuhou Misaki who wore a brand new summer uniform.

Technically, she was the one being targeted.

They ran past a sign at the base of a wind turbine notifying them of a recent murder. The two of them took a turn and left the main road.

“W-wait! Why would you go out of your way to enter an empty alley!?”

“Given their speed, a wide street is more dangerous! When they’re moving that fast, they shouldn’t be able to make tight turns!!”

That idea may not have been wrong, but their pursuer’s abilities exceeded their expectations.

The words on the previous sign returned to Shokuhou’s mind.

There had been a murder recently and a single mistake here could give the two of them a similar fate.

She heard the sound of wheels burning the ground below them.

Their pursuer was a boy in a red riding suit and a full-face helmet. However, he had small inline skate wheels attached in over fifty places: bottoms of the feet, knees, elbows, shoulders, wrists, waist, back, chest, etc.

On top of that, he had two tiny jet engines on his back. They were twenty centimeters wide and fifty-five centimeters long.

The pursuer charged toward them while generally leaning forward like a speed skater.

He did not do anything as sensible as kick off the ground.

It would be more accurate to say he kicked off the wall .

“Dammit!!”

He exceeded two hundred kilometers per hour. That incredible speed rivalled a roller coaster and he would temporarily change his field to the walls or even the ceiling.

Even a simple tackle from a human-sized mass would be a fatal impact at that speed.

And yet the boy held something resembling a bazooka over his shoulder. It was actually an explosive-driven pile bunker.

If they crossed paths, Shokuhou and Kamijou would be taken out in a single strike.

Altogether, the equipment was known as Queen Diver . True to the initial impression it gave, the weapon system had been created from the ground-up to crush Shokuhou specifically. Its overwhelming speed let one charge in before she could control you. The concept was to kill a Level 5 even if it meant your own destruction.

Shokuhou swung around her TV remote regardless, but that method had a certain weakness. Her personal rule was to divide up her too-powerful Mental Out ability in order to make it easier to use. And her personal rule required her to aim the remote at her target.

When the enemy was moving around and around at high speed, her targeting was too slow.

Yet even when she was certain she had aimed in time, the enemy’s movements did not fully stop.

(Does that helmet detect the abnormal brain wave ability and switch control of the suit over to a program!?)

Mental Out may have been the most powerful mental ability, but even it did not work on pure machines or non-human animals. This equipment had clearly been made specifically to target her.

(Beyond the issue of strength, this is just a poor match. And I don’t have time to remove “that limiter” when he’s moving around so fast. They went out of their way to create a weapon with absolutely no use beyond its ability to kill me!!)

While she thought and clenched her teeth, Kamijou snatched the remote from her hand.

“Wai-…”

Before she could protest, the pointy-haired boy had thrown the remote at the red riding suit as hard as he could.

This was a complete waste, much like throwing a gun without bothering to pull the trigger, but it was still effective.

As soon as the remote hit the full-face helmet, the riding suit lost its balance while clinging to the wall and trying to pierce through Shokuhou’s body. And once he lost control, that pursuer riding the rails of an invisible roller coaster became quite fragile.

He flipped over and fell to the ground.

Beyond that, he plowed through everything on the ground at two hundred kilometers per hour. He passed by Shokuhou and Kamijou and crashed into an old bike and some trash cans left in the alley.

That was when Shokuhou heard an explosion and saw orange light burst out.

“You’re kidding.”

Even Kamijou, the one who had supposedly defeated the pursuer, was so dumbfounded that he stopped running.

“Did the shock of the fall mess with the jet engine!? Just how dangerous are these things they’re relying on!?”

It did seem they had put in the bare-minimum of safety measures.

They heard the sound of a shaken soda opening but magnified several dozen times. Something like white steam surrounded the skin-tight Queen Diver suit. It was likely some sort of incombustible gas.

The pursuer had probably been wrapped in flames for less than ten seconds, but the burning temperature of the

jet fuel had been extraordinary. It was not clear what material the suit was made of, but it might have melted onto his skin like cheese.

A civilian ambulance must have passed by the main road because a siren experiencing the Doppler effect reached their ears. The din was unpleasantly reminiscent of death and violence.

Then, just as Kamijou began to run forward to help the criminal who had targeted their lives, something else made him stop.

More Queen Divers were approaching.

With the unpleasant sound of their wheels scraping along the ground, they blocked the boy and girl’s path in front, behind, and even above.

They all wore red riding suits and full-face helmets, but their silhouettes suggested the group contained both boys and girls. Based on their heights and shoulder-widths, there was a large range of ages as well.

Kamijou held Shokuhou’s hand while giving an annoyed yell.

“He was with you, wasn’t he!? Aren’t you worried about him at all!?”

“We won’t let first aid get in our way,” replied a male voice. “We have something more important to deal with. ”

They all hid their faces behind helmets that blocked mental attacks to an unknown extent and they all aimed their explosive-driven pile bunkers at the boy and girl.

“Death to the Level 5.”

A deluge of noise surrounded them as the pursuers prepared their weapons.

The human malice created a cage more frightening than the weapons.

“Death to the Level 5.”

It sounded like the ritual of some strange cult.

Their resentful voices would overpower anyone who heard them but showed just how misguided they were.

“Death to the Level 5 who has taken everything from us.”

Part 11

The current Shokuhou Misaki recalled those events while facing the alley entrance in the chilly wind.

It might have sounded absurd, but even outside this city, it was common to find attractions where one raced down a slope in a wheel-covered riding suit or to find special-made suits that used inline skates and a jet engine on the back to reach over one hundred kilometers per hour.

That group had combined a few such things and added the high stability and handling of electronic control to create the weapon known as the Queen Diver.

The name of that red riding suit group came to her mind.

Deadlock.

The group using that English word as a name could be described as the students whose powers development

had reached a standstill and would not progress any further for some reason.

They belonged to a great number of different schools and years.

Some were genuine high-class ladies and some were delinquent boys.

The ideology that bound Deadlock was shockingly simple and the actions they actually took went beyond shocking.

Shokuhou set foot in that alley for the first time in a long while.

She normally never used such areas (and she could not let any of the Tokiwadai students know about somewhere that made her as nervous as this), but she was in the mood today.

The abandoned bike and trash cans were of course gone, but the general location had not changed much.

Halfway down the alley, she stopped and looked straight up.

“Yes, yes. It was right here.”

The sky spread out while confined to the shape of that narrow alley and a rusty old emergency staircase invaded the space of that limited sky.

There was a small chain-link door at the entrance to the staircase, but she could easily climb over it if she ignored her short skirt.

While treading on each red and rusty step that could break through at any moment, she climbed the emergency staircase.

She was not interested in any of the doors on the way up.

She was on her way to the roof of the small multi-tenant building.

Beyond that was the final location.

The final location she and Kamijou Touma had run to.

Part 12

They had jumped from building to building, rooftop to rooftop.

But having to bring along Shokuhou Misaki and the fluttering short skirt of her brand new summer uniform had to have been a great detriment to Kamijou Touma. She was willing to admit it now: she was terribly unathletic. During the athletic test in April of that year, her awful results had led her to manipulate the memories of everyone around her. She had to go to the great effort of working up her courage and then taking a running start to cross the “ravines” that were not even a meter wide, so Deadlock and their Queen Diver suits naturally caught up in no time.

They were surrounded on every side.

Deadlock must have been communicating by phone or something because more riding suit students arrived along different routes. More than thirty of them had gathered on the roof. Shokuhou could try to use her remote to have them take each other out and Kamijou could clench his right fist, but if Deadlock charged forward while prepared to be caught in a jet engine explosion, the two of them would not escape unharmed.

One of the scarlet Queen Divers spoke to Kamijou rather than Shokuhou.

“Are you sure you want to keep this up?”

He was telling Kamijou he would be saved if he backed off now.

But…

“Of course I’m sure.”

Kamijou Touma did not hesitate to reply.

Shokuhou Misaki could not understand what he was saying even as his back protected her.

She was just a passing acquaintance to him.

They were not childhood friends with a decade of history, they were not blood-related siblings, they were not dating, and they had no other special relationship like that. So why had he responded so readily? What was it that drove him?

It seemed the riding suit boy had the same question.

"You must be a pretty powerful esper to say that. But don't take us lightly because we rely on tools. Even Level 4s aren't uncommon in our group."

"I'm nothing that amazing," spat out the boy. "I'm a zero. A Level 0. …But there are still things I can't allow. And when it comes to those things, I'm ready to clench my fist."

"I see. So you're one of us."

The Queen Diver boy did not mock him for it.

In fact, some of the calm in his voice vanished. The tone of his voice suggested that – in a way – facing a Level 0 boy had greater meaning than facing that Level 5 girl.

That may have been the case for them.

He raised a hand to stop his impatient comrades and spoke.

"Don't you find it odd?"

"Find what odd?"

“Everything.”

The riding suit boy did not make any meaningless or self-important theatrics.

In this alone, he was sincere.

He took the shortest course to the crux of the matter.

“From the very fact that you’ve decided to fight for Shokuhou Misaki in this hopeless situation, doesn’t it seem like she’s already controlling you with her Mental Out?”

Part 13

The current Shokuhou Misaki felt the chilly wind on the square roof of the multi-tenant building.

She was not about to jump from building to building. She was aware of her own lack of athletic ability and she was wearing the short skirt of her winter uniform.

Instead, she stayed here and thought to herself while almost feeling left behind by her past self.

“…”

There was such a thing as an AIM Diffusion Field.

It was a tiny, tiny power subconsciously emitted by an esper. With Pyrokinesis, it was heat. With Psychokinesis, it was pressure. With Electromasters, it was electricity. It always matched the esper’s type of power and it was so weak it could only just barely be detected with a microscope or precision measuring device.

But no matter how weak it was, power was power.

That power was definitely emitted.

And what was Shokuhou Misaki’s power?

In Mental Out’s case, what kind of power did she subconsciously emit into the outer world?

That was the group named Deadlock’s motive for keeping an eye on Level 5s and occasionally putting together a suicidal plan to crush them.

Someone was bending the world in a way convenient to them.

They were likely a powerful esper, so they would naturally be one of those at the top.

The world’s fairness had been twisted to those people’s benefit and the unfairness that created was forced onto many others.

And to top it all off, the ones twisting the world for their own benefit even if it meant mass-producing misfortune and tragedy *were not even aware they were doing it*.

Because they were not aware, compromise and negotiation would be impossible. They could not stop it even if they tried, so the only way to bring fairness back to the world was to kill them.

Deadlock had asked her a few questions.

Have you ever thought your life was going a little too well?

Have you never thought something might have been sacrificed to give you your high-class status or the growth of your powers?

Yes.

Just like Kamijou Touma as he threw his life away for her sake.

Part 14

“Ah.”

Shokuhou Misaki let out that quiet voice while the boy protected her despite being surrounded by Queen Divers on the multi-tenant building roof.

The doubt brought worry.

The worry brought fear.

Had her power thrown someone else’s life out of order ?

Not only that, had it caused anyone’s death?

Had it happened without her realizing it?

Had it happened without her being able to control it?

The murder notification at the alley entrance came to mind. The refrain of civilian ambulance service sirens played again and again.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!
Ahhhhhhhhh

What if she had already controlled countless people without realizing it and that had led them to lose fortunes, closed off their futures, or even taken their lives ?

If she still claimed to be safe and normal after all that …

She looked around her.

All of them wore the same red riding suits and full-face helmets. If her own success was what had stolen the lives of those faceless students and even robbed them of the possibility of proudly showing their faces, just how should one describe her? She could always claim she had not known, that it was not under her control, and that it was therefore not her fault, but who would those words actually save?

“What a joke.”

But even though Shokuhou Misaki had put him in this dangerous situation, the pointy-haired boy’s words cut straight through the stagnant atmosphere.

"Is it fun blaming others for your own failures? The harder it is to prove something, the harder it is to argue against it. You all made up a reason why it was okay for you to fail. That way you could rest easy as you got lazy. …You know very well this girl isn't what caused your setbacks."

"Perhaps," said one of the red Queen Divers. He was completely calm and showed no anger. "Even I wonder if we're right about this. Every time I think about attacking the Level 5 named Shokuhou Misaki, I feel something like a conscience throbbing inside me. It says this is all the work of a monster created by our own weak hearts and the external factor of Shokuhou Misaki has nothing to do with it."

But he went on to reject everything he had just said.

"But doesn't that seem really suspicious to you?"

"…"

"You can't deny the possibility that this throbbing I think is my conscience was actually created for someone else's benefit."

Normally, that would have been nothing but a delusion.

It would have been the crazy ramblings of someone who could not control his own heart.

But with her, it was possible. With Mental Out, it was possible. And she could only face the world on the conscious level, so not even she could be certain because she subconsciously emitted some of her power.

“That is why I won’t call your anger wrong.”

The riding suit boy readily prepared the pile bunker on his shoulder and viewed Kamijou Touma as a clear enemy, but his voice showed he recognized him as a fellow human.

“But that is also why you should wonder where that emotion comes from. It’s wrong to die for something like this. If you know that but still stand to protect her, something doesn’t add up. So what created that distortion? Think about who motivated you to stand there and why.”

Shokuhou Misaki was certain that clinched it.

No matter how much she tried to deny it, her words would never reach Kamijou Touma. She had not even rid herself of doubt, so her words would never get through to someone else.

And if he abandoned her, it was all over.

She could control the Queen Divers with her remote, but if they charged toward her at two hundred kilometers per hour from thirty different directions, would even swinging around two remotes be enough? Even if she had them take each other out, it would not be easy. They were set to switch to program control once she took over.

Deadlock was prepared to die as long as they could defeat Mental Out.

Even if a head-on collision at that speed would crush their bodies and even if they risked a large explosion if that JP-5 jet fuel leaked out, it was all worth it to them if they could defeat this Level 5.

Thus, it was over.

She would either be torn apart by a pile bunker or roasted in a jet fuel explosion. Whatever happened, her

slim chances of survival vanished once Kamijou Touma gave up on her.

That was the future that should have awaited her.

However…

"None of that matters."

She heard a quiet voice.

At first, she thought it was an illusion brought on by her weak heart.

"That crazy conspiracy theory has nothing to do with this. Listen, you thugs. It doesn't matter if these feelings came from my own heart or if they were placed there by a Level 5. It doesn't matter if I really think this or if I'm being deceived and manipulated by someone."

"…Eh?"

A hoarse voice escaped her throat, but the boy did not turn toward her.

He stayed put so he could protect the girl named Shokuhou Misaki while also allowing his voice to reach

the boy in the red riding suit. Even while surrounded by countless deadly weapons, he tightly clenched his right fist. He did so despite knowing he could never take on this many people at once.

And he spoke with his back turned.

“If it leads me to stand here and protect a girl with tears in her eyes, I wouldn’t want anything else.”

It was likely that instant that a decisive gear began to turn within her.

That was the instant in which the most powerful mind-controlling esper realized these feelings still slept within her.

“Heh.”

On the other hand, the boy in the red riding suit laughed.

But it was not a mocking or despising laugh.

“Ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

He had accepted the person named Kamijou Touma.

That living example of a possibility they could not copy may have shown him an aspiration different from his resentful feelings toward this Level 5.

Guided by the boy, Kamijou laughed quietly too.

Even from behind him, Shokuhou could see his shoulders shaking.

At first glance, the scene held the gentle atmosphere of a conclusion.

But rationally-speaking, that mood was quite unnatural and it was soon destroyed by the Queen Diver's next coldhearted words.

"Then I hope you're prepared, you damn clown."

"You bet. And I hope you guys are willing to put your life on the line and come at me with everything you've got."

With a great roar, the boys and girls of Deadlock rushed in from thirty different directions while wielding their explosive-driven pile bunkers.

They had recognized their opponent’s broad-mindedness but would still kill him.

It was like the one-on-one clash between well-known commanders during an ancient battle.

That was the form this battle took.

Part 15

The current Shokuhou Misaki let out a small breath.

“Sigh.”

That ended it all.

Since she and Kamijou Touma lived to this day, it went without saying who had won that fight against the student group named Deadlock.

And after a few more incidents, the two had parted ways.

She would be lying if she said she had no regrets.

There was no point in asking if she had accepted it.

(I’m starting to feel a little sentimental.)

She was aware of it, but she made no attempt to fight the urge inside her.

She left the multi-tenant building rooftop and began walking through the cityscape of Academy City. On the way, she entered a subway station and took a train to another district. She knew where she was going. It was the one place in those memories she had not visited today.

That would be District 21 and the circular artificial lake on the mountaintop that formed a part of a geothermal power station.

It was the place where everything between them had begun and an important support for her entire personality.

“I thought I would go for the complete set of locations while I was at it,” she muttered while walking along the winding mountain path.

She was already soaking with sweat which was unbefitting of an elegant lady.

“Honestly! Why do I have to go to all this effort? Did I really trudge all this way back then!?”

She had started this memory tour on a whim, but after coming this far, she was reluctant to turn back. Just as she used the remotes to regulate her power, she was often pulled around by her own personal rules. She was now walking up the mountain path in complete desperation.

(Honestly. And I know perfectly well that doing this isn’t going to change a thing.)

By the time she reached the peak, the sun had set and night had fallen.

“Pant pant pant pant.”

She bent over, placed her hands on her knees, and frantically tried to catch her breath. She was completely exhausted, but she tried to encourage herself by saying this was for the best because it recreated the atmosphere from back then.

Finally, she raised her head to look at the area from her memories.

Ignoring the initial false start, this was the wonderful location where she had met Kamijou Touma.

The clouds covering the moon must have cleared because the scene suddenly appeared before her night-adjusted eyes.

And she saw it once more.

“……Huh?”

Something slowly ran down her spine.

It was a terrible, horrible, indescribable feeling that went beyond a common chill.

Reality seemed to leave her.

She was overcome by such great confusion that she no longer felt even the pull of gravity.

There was indeed a geothermal power station there.

But it had an entirely different design from the one in her memories.

(Did I get the place wrong?)

The lake was much larger and the tower in the center was a different color, height, and shape. However, there had only been the one winding path, so she could not have taken a wrong turn. Not to mention that there was only the one mountain peak. No matter what route she had taken, this is where she would have ended up. There was no way to get it wrong.

In that case, what was this?

What would lead to the scene before her eyes?

(Was the power station itself demolished and rebuilt?)

She suggested a possibility, but it was most likely impossible. Demolishing such a large facility would require a lot of work, including explosive blasts. The vibrations that caused would have affected the dam and radio telescope on the same mountain. If the shaking stirred up the mud and filth accumulated at the bottom of the dam, the standard purification process would no longer suffice. But Shokuhou had not heard of a large-scale water restriction to stop water pollution in the city.

And after eliminating every other possibility, only the simplest of explanations remained.

She had left this one for last because she had not wanted to think about it.

That being…

“*I was wrong?*” she muttered in a daze. “*My memories were wrong? My memories with Kamijou Touma didn’t exist?*”

When she hesitantly voiced that possibility, she shuddered at how repulsive it was. Like the bottommost card in a pyramid had been roughly snatched away, the series of kind memories that had begun here all came tumbling down.

No.

That couldn’t be it.

It just couldn’t.

Remembering something, she frantically dug through her handbag. Mixed in with the remotes she used to control her powers was a cheap emergency whistle painted silver.

That boy had personally given this to her with the following words:

“Use it if you’re in trouble. It might give me more chances to save you.”

If she had that whistle, it should have meant her memories were accurate.

(But.)

She wanted to believe that, yet she rejected her own hope.

(What if some unknown third party gave me this along with the false memories? Then this whistle doesn’t qualify as material evidence.)

Her anguish continued.

Because this concerned formless memories, it was difficult to set a stopping point and draw a conclusion.

But at the same time, was this even possible?

Could someone else manipulate her memories such that she would not notice for such a long period of time?

She had the Level 5 powers of Mental Out, so no one could match her when it came to people’s minds. She would never have allowed someone to mess with her own memories and then not notice the change for so long .

And on top of that, these memories were the most important to her and came from the gentlest part of her.

(But…)

The great deviation between her memories and the scene before her shook her mind as she tried to fight the doubt.

(What if someone did accomplish it?)

Whoever it was would have been using something truly bizarre.

This went beyond that Deadlock group that she was no longer sure had even existed. She knew of the deepest darkness of this city thanks to Dolly who was related to the mass-produced military ****** and the ******* Project that created a giant version of a certain Level 5’s brain, but she doubted even the people related to those incidents could outdo her so perfectly.

“My…”

In that case, if this scene was right and her memories were wrong, it meant someone even more powerful than those people had attacked her without her even knowing it.

“My memories…”

She brought a hand to her head and could feel something explode inside her chest.

That something was anger.

Her rage was directed at the one who had set foot inside the most important part of her and trampled on everything there.

“What did you do to my memories?”

She removed the glove covering her fingertips, pulled out a digital recorder remote, and pressed it against her own temple.

“Category 044 / Extract the past year’s memories from the object I touch with my right hand.”

This was the path she had once walked, but no information came from the guardrail.

She found nothing, even with her mindreading ability.

“What did you do to my memoriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeee !?”

Even now, that pointy-haired boy’s smile flashed through the back of her mind.

The great warmth of that smile only shook her all the more.

Were those memories real or not?

What had truly happened in those days back then?

A battle was beginning for Mental Out, the #5 Level 5, who was overcome with anguish.

She would fight to find this unseen enemy and grasp the truth.

Between the Lines 1

A certain golden retriever did not like pet cafes.

Or perhaps he should be called the researcher named Kihara Noukan.

They were officially a welcoming place that advertised their many dishes specifically designed for pets so the owners could enjoy themselves with their pets, but once he actually crossed the threshold, he found the humans

were treated superior. Or rather, the animals were meaninglessly treated as inferiors. All in all, it felt like he was being mocked.

“Look, look, sensei. This puppy cake is low fat and low sugar, but it’s still really sweet. C’mon, say ‘ah’. C’mon, c ’mon. Say ‘ah’.”

“Ahhh!? What is this mass of artificial sweetener supposed to be!? Honestly, it pisses me off!!”

The surrounding customers looked surprised when the refined voice of a middle-aged man came from what was clearly a dog, but this was Academy City. Nowhere else in the world had as much of an affinity with or persuasiveness concerning technology. In fact, it had almost reached the level of a religious belief. The people began lively but misguided discussions along the lines of “that talking collar is nice” or “I wonder what site sells it ”.

But the woman in a cheap suit and a lab coat paid them no heed.

“C’mooon. I ordered this nice puppy cake that’s made for a dog’s body, so eat it. You’re always saying not to waste food, right?”

"If you want to buy me a treat, make it a cigar. I won't accept anything less than a top-class Cuban, though."

"That doesn't sound like something I'd hear from a resident of Academy City where everything's produced in agriculture buildings."

"Yuiitsu-kun."

"What is it, sensei? Oh, do you want me to brush you!? "

"Get to the point. Cafes like this are awkward enough for guys."

"Only after you finish the puppy ca-… Sorry, I got carried away. Anyway, it looks like Shokuhou Misaki has noticed. And it seems the 'ant' views the 'bee's' movement as a trigger because she has started moving too."

"So that means she will…"

"Yes, she has finished biding her time. I've lost contact with the entire section, so it was probably taken over from within. …She is a queen ant now."

"Just like a samurai ant, hm?"

"Right. That's the kind that attacks other colonies to create slaves, isn't it?"

"This means things are going to get rough for a while."

"Ah hah hah! Isn't that perfect for *your work*!?"

"Yuiitsu-kun." The golden retriever's voice grew even deeper. "This may be an irresponsible and out-of-place comment as a Kihara, but I am not particularly fond of that Kihara-like side of you."

"…"

"We can sincerely carry out what destruction is necessary, but I dislike unnecessary destruction. Of course, this is an issue of like and dislike, not of good and evil."

"I really don't get you."

Kihara Yuiitsu childishly pouted her lips.

She looked a lot like a child pretending to be a poor student to get the teacher's attention.

“After all, that means you’d be willing to place thousands or even millions of people on the dissection table as long as it was necessary, right? How is that any different from us?”

“As I said, it is an issue of like and dislike, not of good and evil. And unfortunately, reality sometimes brings about situations like that. And that is why there will always be a place for horrible individuals like myself.”

Chapter 2: Blank Paper >> Labyrinth — Broken_road.

Part 1

Shokuhou Misaki pulled out a thin ribbon. She passed it through the emergency whistle's fastener, formed a large loop, and wore it as a necklace. She then pushed it inside the chest of her uniform as a hidden treasure.

She could not even trust that treasure, but whether it was real or false, it was her one physical connection to those summer days. If real, it was a connection to that boy. If false, it was a clue to the truth left by the mysterious culprit.

Either way, she could not let it go.

She could not have it stolen while disguised as pickpocketing or purse-snatching.

"Now, then."

With that done, she had to go back over the information.

The scenery that formed the foundation of her heart was nowhere to be found. At its supposed location, she had found a completely different structure. She had tried to search the area with her mind-reading ability, but she had not turned up any residual memories from that time.

Then what was the scenery in her mind?

What were her memories with Kamijou Touma that had started there?

"…"

She was the #5 of Academy City's seven Level 5s and she possessed Mental Out, the strongest purely mental power.

No matter what power, technique, or device someone used, it should have been nearly impossible to outdo her and manipulate her mind. It was no different than challenging Misaka Mikoto, the #3, to a hacking competition or picking a fight with her using only a stun gun.

She would not say it was absolutely impossible, but unless one had a tremendous amount of skill, facing a Level 5 with her own special skill was suicidal.

But if someone could have pulled it off by force, who was most suspicious?

Who could use pure "skill" to take on a monstrous Level 5 and yet smile fearlessly the entire time?

"That's right," groaned Shokuhou Misaki in the nighttime mountains of District 21. "There is one, now that I think about it. That brain of the Board of Directors stands on almost equal footing with me despite not using any kind of power!!"

That relationship may have been similar to the one between Misaka Mikoto and Uiharu Kazari.

She was a close approximation yet also a sort of natural enemy.

She was someone who shared the same past yet also possessed the concrete techniques needed to abuse that fact.

And her name was…

"Kumokawa Seria!!"

Shouting out may have sounded dramatic, but she was still in the mountains of District 21 and she would have to walk down the path she came on to reach her home ground in District 7.

"Pant pant."

While breathing far too heavily for an elegant lady and dripping sweat, she made her way down the winding mountain path.

Like peeling back the metal plating on an object, the fear and determination that had shaken her upon seeing that changed scenery was worn away by simple exhaustion.

"Just you wait!" she shouted in desperation. "I swear I'm going to punch you with my own hands!!"

Most likely, even the mastermind behind this was not prepared to handle an outburst like this.

Part 2

Lactic acid.

Simply hearing that term might bring an image of dairy products to mind, but the exhaustion filling Shokuhou Misaki's entire body left her in no state for that.

She had completely forgotten that Academy City's public transportation stopped running once the curfew hit. She had been at a loss once she saw the shutters covering the entrance to the subway station.

While trudging between districts on foot, she pulled her cellphone from her skirt pocket.

Devices like this were not her forte, but she logged onto the simple SNS she had done nothing more than join.

And she posted a short question.

"//Queen Bee: Are you familiar with the artificial lake on a District 21 mountain?"

Not even a minute later, a disappointing triple digit number of responses reached her.

She was the Queen of the largest clique within Tokiwadai Middle School and she had plenty of connections outside the school as well.

This was just how many people were still clinging to a dead SNS account she had left empty after being urged to join.

"//Shigu-nyan: I am sorry I cannot live up to your expectations, but I am not."

"//Matsu: Do you mean the experimental geothermal power station named Ground Geo? I searched it and found this official site."

"//Cat Claw: Is this for homework? I can look into it if you want."

"//Bunny 44: Hawa!? Queen, have you decided to become a factory field trip girl!?"

"//Eternal Beginner's Luck: If so, the factory district in District 17 is the more traditional choice."

Etc., etc.

(No good, huh?)

She sighed and looked away from the phone.

It had been such an important place that she had never told anyone about it, but that had completely come back to bite her. All of them either said they did not know or had only just then searched for it. Also, all of the information they found did not match her memories. It simply cornered her even more as she fought on her own .

She rethought her plan and asked a different question. This time, she attached a photo she took with the phone.

The photo was of the cheap emergency whistle that was painted silver.

"//Queen Bee: Do you know what company makes this?"

Again, the comment field filled up in no time.

It grew as busy as a beehive.

"//June Bride: I just searched it and it is made by PM General Security, a company that makes police batons and stun guns."

"//Blatant Lie: Looks like it isn't sold in stores. They cooperate with Anti-Skill to hand them out at schools or public facilities."

"//Chiffon: There are apparently many different variations. Just looking at the colors, there are twenty-three different types. The silver ones are distributed in District 7 and some collectors try to get their hands on a complete set."

"//Red Riding Hood: But putting that paint in your mouth does not look good for your health."

"//Bamboo Leaf Panda: And Queen, our school's faculty room has some in a box labelled 'please take one'. "

Etc., etc.

(No useful clues here either.)

Hearing the silver color was distributed at District 7 schools sounded important, but both Tokiwadai and that boy's school were in that same district. In the worst case, it was possible she had been made to think he had given it to her when she had actually picked it up at her own school.

None of this allowed her to relax.

She logged out and placed the phone back in her skirt pocket.

She felt as if she had needlessly increased her weariness.

By the time she made it back to her home ground in District 7, she felt completely exhausted, both physically and mentally.

She sat on a park bench and gasped for breath while massaging her thighs with both hands. The sight of a middle school girl with such a nice body doing that might have seemed a little inappropriate, but she could not avoid that right now.

Her lack of exercise may have been catching up to her because her thighs and calves were twitching unnaturally.

"I-I'm gonna die. I'm gonna die before this conspiracy can do anything to me."

After spending a good twenty or thirty minutes, she finally got over that "mountain" of potential cramping and hesitantly stood up from the bench.

"Uuh… Now, then."

(Kumokawa Seria will be moving from stronghold to stronghold for safety, but is she still in that last place?)

As far as Shokuhou knew, Kumokawa Seria was the only person who could outdo Mental Out and manipulate her mind, esper powers or not.

(Is she the one behind this, is she working for someone , or did someone learn or steal her techniques? At any rate, it looks like I need to speak with her.)

She left the bench and headed for the park's exit, but she passed a brightly-shining drink vending machine on the way.

She recognized a few of the soda bottles in it.

They were the ones that pointy-haired boy had always tried to drink, but she had always stopped him. That thought nearly brought a smile to her lips, but it never arrived.

She could not rely on that when she still did not know if the memories were even real.

After deciding that, she left the vending machine.

Part 3

Instead of visiting a student dormitory in District 7, Shokuhou made her way to an apartment complex meant for school faculty. Kumokawa Seria often used that method when choosing a hideout.

However, a slightly unexpected voice reached her from the side.

“Queen.”

The voice belonged to the gorgeous ringlet curl girl from Shokuhou’s clique. She was another elite from Tokiwadai.

Shokuhou frowned.

"I do not believe I gave you any orders."

"There is no need. We have our own independent information network. And of course we are going to think something is amiss when you suddenly ask cryptic questions on an account you have not touched in over three months. Around ten other volunteers are waiting for orders. You need not explain the details and we can go without knowing the big picture. …Can you simply tell us what to do?"

"…"

She was not opposed to receiving "orders".

Shokuhou was surprised to find how common such praiseworthy people were.

For an instant, she thought of the boy who now only existed in her memories. Were those memories real or not? She still did not know, but she smiled a little.

"I will if I need you, but now is not a good time. The more people with me, the greater the danger of being controlled."

"I see. When you need us? Then how about we at least create an alibi for you leaving the dorm, Queen?"

"That I will ask you. Please, please do!"

After that honest plea, Shokuhou took a step away from the clique girl.

The ringlet curl girl perceptively frowned.

"Queen?"

"This is a request and not an order," said Shokuhou Misaki with a gentle smile. "Leave me alone for now. The person I am about to meet is just as dangerous as me. The more people with me, the greater the danger from her manipulation ability."

"Understood."

This clique girl was not so crass as to protest.

"Just be careful."

"Thank you"

Shokuhou entered the faculty apartment building on her own. She got through the lock by controlling the dorm manager to get her hands on the master key.

She reached her destination floor with the elevator, stopped in front of Kumokawa's door, and prepared to stick the master key in the lock. But that was when she stopped. She removed her glove, traced her fingertip along the surface of the door, and pressed a digital recorder remote against her own temple.

"Category 044 / Extract the past twenty-four hours' worth of memories from the object I touch with my right hand."

"I was right."

She removed her hand from the door and opened the door to the neighboring room.

She circled around to the balcony, climbed over the simple divider that could be destroyed with a tackle in case of fire, and broke into Kumokawa's room through the balcony window.

She looked toward the entrance from the empty living room and saw the same information she had obtained a moment before.

A few sensors were attached to the inside of the door. They could have been simple alarms or they could have been rigged to blow up the entire room, but either way, she was not about to touch them.

(Now, there's no sign of her even after breaking in like this, so is she not home? Or is she hiding in the closet hoping to make a surprise attack?)

That was when her cellphone vibrated.

She answered it and heard a familiar voice.

"C'mon, isn't this visit a little sudden? Are all Tokiwadai girls like that?"

"I would rather not hear who you are comparing me too, but can I assume you have something to feel guilty about since you made such quick use of your escape ability?"

"I can't understand why anyone would want to be anywhere near you when you can use all those remotes of yours."

"Then how did you predict I was coming?"

"Because I've scattered cameras around the area to make a personal security network. You're ridiculously powerful when it comes to the human mind but weak against machines. Although at this rate, you're going to turn into the foolish college girl who has to ask for help wiring up her video system."

Then something else happened and it happened silently.

A red dot smaller than the tip of her little finger reached the center of her chest.

(A laser pointer!? But I didn't find any information on this.)

"Oh, c'mon. You weren't completely relying on your mindreading, were you? That's easily fooled by temporarily overwriting your own memories and going around touching everything."

The girl sounded both mocking and surprised.

The clique members who were all high level espers of Tokiwadai would be waiting outside, but they would not make it in time even if Shokuhou contacted them now. The finger on the trigger would be faster.

She naturally looked out the window.

"I'm pretty sure you had no sniping ability. Do you have a new pet?"

"A foolish assassin in sunglasses had some misguided suspicions about me, just like you now. A beast I'd thought I was done with was still hanging around, so I'm using him in exchange for a peaceful school life. Oh, and he's about as uncomfortable a chair as you can find."

Kumokawa Seria did not sound the least bit amused as she continued.

"By the way, the sensors on the entrance activate a detergent bomb that will scatter chlorine gas and the hot water heater is modified to fill the place with carbon monoxide if you so much as touch it. I'm fairly certain Academy City's #5 can't disarm all of that at once."

If she had wanted to kill Shokuhou, she could have done so at any time.

But despite announcing that, she did not go through with it without warning.

“Are you saying you are at least willing to talk?”

“I could say the same about you. If you had given yourself as many pawns as you could without worrying about who you sacrificed, I wouldn’t have escaped unharmed.”

Kumokawa’s composure never wavered.

“Now, how about we get down to business? What exactly do you want to discuss? To be clear, I’m a little ticked you entered my place with your shoes on. Depending on your answer, I may just have a new chair. ”

“The summer of last year,” began Shokuhou Misaki. “ It was between him and me, but you played into it a little . I want to hear about all that again.”

“…”

Kumokawa Seria briefly fell silent.

Shokuhou hated how very similar they were. Especially how the gears so easily fell out of place when he came into the picture, despite how perfect and powerful they were.

Finally, the girl gave her response.

And it came in the form of a new figure standing directly behind Shokuhou.

"!?"

Sensing a presence behind her, she frantically moved away.

Kumokawa Seria ended the call on her phone, erased the smile on her lips, and spoke.

"In that case, let's do this in person. Not that this is a casual topic."

"D-didn't you say you don't want to be anywhere near me."

"I don't, but I have no choice. Not once his name has been mentioned." Kumokawa sounded utterly annoyed. "By the way, I've given orders to shoot immediately if I start acting oddly. And he doesn't seem to like me, so that trigger will feel really light. Just know that using me as a hostage won't do any good."

"That doesn't matter. Not until I've heard what you have to say."

Kumokawa gestured to the sofa and Shokuhou fell so heavily into it that she bounced.

The room's owner sat on the opposite end.

"Now, what about him?"

"Everything. Embarrassingly enough, I have lost my ability to say for sure if my memories are accurate. But if I have some evidence from someone else who interacted with him back then, it might help me make that judgment about my past."

"I see. So that's why you suspected me." Kumokawa crossed her legs in annoyance. "But that question is meaningless. We spent the same time with him in the

past, but we only had him as a common acquaintance. We never set foot in each other's private affairs."

"…"

"You don't know anything about my incident and I don't know anything about yours, so we can't exactly compare notes here."

Shokuhou clicked her tongue and pulled the silver whistle on a ribbon from her chest.

"Do you recognize this?"

"They hand those out everywhere in District 7. And not just at schools. You can find them at libraries, hospitals, and any other kind of public facility. They pass them out every year during the disaster training, so there are just too many of them everywhere. They're a lot like pocket tissues, but there's no use for anything past the first one."

This was further confirmation that the whistle did not qualify as material evidence.

Anyone could get their hands on one if they wanted.

"That means the only other person I can rely on is him himself. But…"

"Yeah, that won't work. You must know perfectly well what's happened to his memories."

Kamijou Touma had lost his memories.

She could not rely on Kamijou or Kumokawa who had shared that past with her and she could not trust her own memories, so she was beginning to think there was no way of proving that past had existed.

"How about trying this from a different angle?" asked Kumokawa. "I don't know what exactly has happened to you, but this would be something that got the better of Academy City's #5 and kept you from noticing for quite a long time. That would require a high level of technology."

"I had thought you were the one behind it."

"What would I gain from messing with your head?"

"You would get him all to yourself," immediately replied Shokuhou. "Of course, that would only make sense *if I was still in contact with him*."

Kumokawa fell silent.

However, she was not trembling in rage over a false accusation.

"You're right. I could've done that. Damn. Why didn't I ever think of it!?"

"Wait."

"But about this." Kumokawa held her head in her hand. "It had to have taken quite a bit of technology to pull off, so whoever it was must have something to gain that's worth that. Do you know what memories were falsified and what they've led you to do? And if so, who benefits from that? If we knew that, we could narrow it down a good bit."

"Who benefits, you say?"

The Kamijou Touma in her memories had become a spoiling and kind support for her.

Had someone set things up so she would help him?

He himself did not have the high level of technology needed, so was some third party trying to control both of them much like in the Agitate Halation Project?

"The only other hint I can think of is the actual technology used. Whether an esper power, a technique, or a device, it had to have been something highly specialized if it fooled you. If there's any kind of trace left , I might be able to find where it came from."

Shokuhou shook one hand back and forth.

"It couldn't have been an esper power. No one could ever outdo me there."

"You're probably right about that. And I already pointed out your biggest weak point…or rather, blind spot. Do you remember what that is?"

"What?"

Shokuhou looked confused, but Kumokawa continued immediately afterwards.

"*As I said earlier, you're powerful when it comes to the human mind but ridiculously weak against machines. What*

would happen if someone used a machine that manipulates the human mind?"

"…"

This caught her off guard.

She was left speechless and Kumokawa gave an exasperated sigh.

"Some espers with high basic specs can get by on pure strength alone, so they get lax in checking the small loopholes in their powers. That's the type that tends to get beaten up by him."

With that said, Kumokawa stood from the sofa.

For some reason, she urged Shokuhou to stand as well.

"Okay. I'll help, so come with me."

"Help with what?"

"Like I said, we might find a trace of the device used on you. There could be something embedded inside you

or a wound where something was injected into the skin. C'mon, you can use my bathroom, so it's time for a thorough examination."

"Wait! The bathroom!? Wait, wait! I can do this on my own!! I said wait!!"

"They've already messed with your head, so it might have a security system that makes you look right past the oddity. Honestly, it's not like I want to see you naked."

The red dot in the center of Shokuhou's chest vanished .

At the same time, Kumokawa Seria dragged her toward the changing room with a surprising amount of strength.

They closed the door from the inside.

"Just to be sure, would you rather remove your clothes on your own or do I have to do it?"

"Oh, honestly! I can do it myself, so look the other way !!"

Shokuhou's face and then entire body turned red as she shouted back, but Kumokawa did not comply.

Half in desperation, Shokuhou removed her blazer. She just about stopped with her hands on her white blouse, but pursuing the mystery of her memories was more important now. With that in mind, she quickly removed it.

Now wearing a fully-exposed white bra (with a lace spider web pattern that just barely covered everything) and a pleated skirt, she asked a simple question.

"Th-the skirt too?"

"I said it was going to be a thorough examination, didn't I? Personally, I'd find it creepier that some unknown person had messed with my body and some trace might still remain."

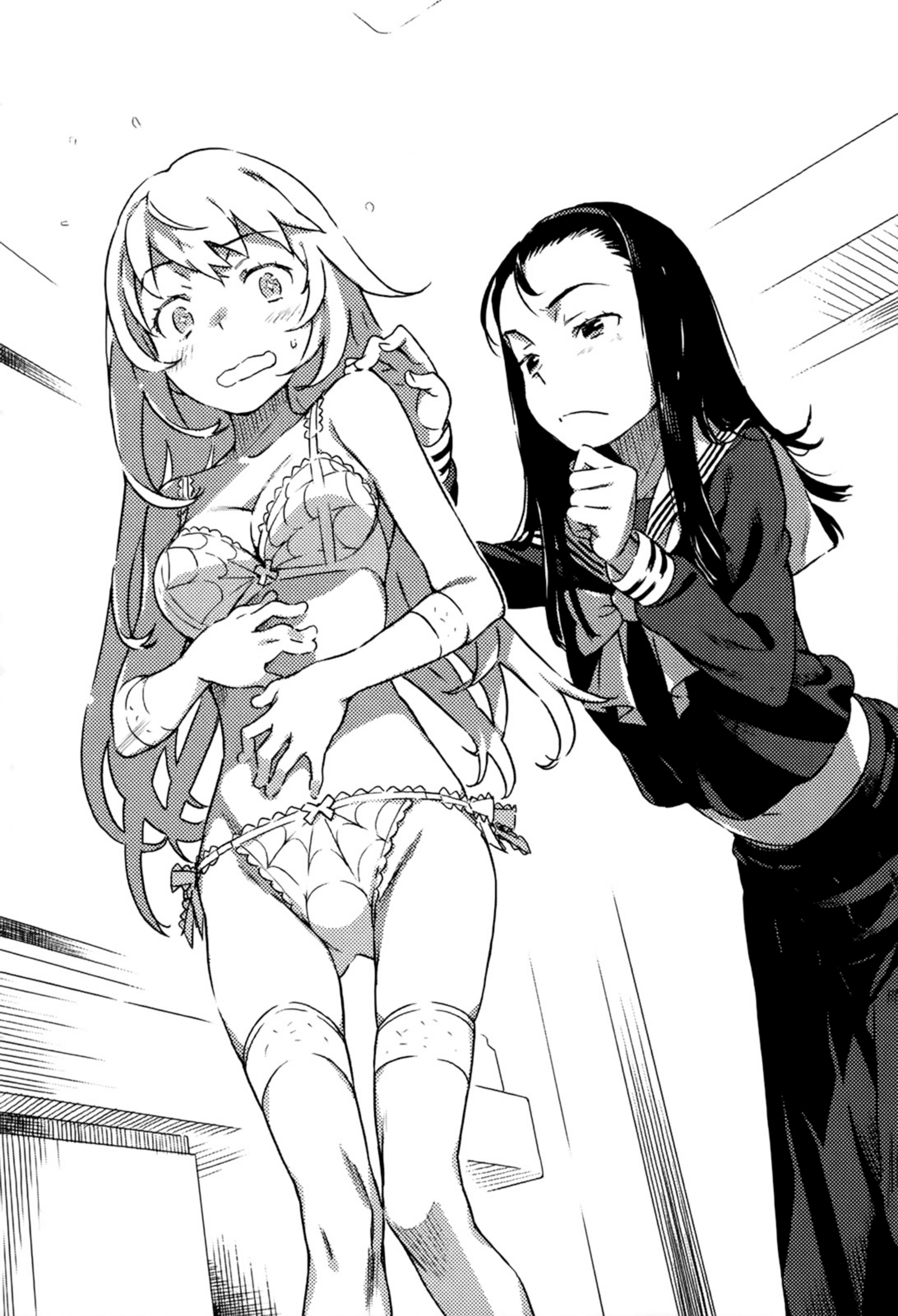
She lowered the side zipper and the skirt fell to the floor.

She finally wore only her underwear, long gloves, and knee socks.

"Um, the underwear too?"

"Fine, fine. I'll spare you that for now. But if this turns up nothing, you'll have no choice but to remove that as well."

For some reason, Kumokawa was acting irritatingly superior.



Standing in her underwear, Shokuhou pulled her hair up with one hand and stared into the distance.

"Sigh. If I think of this as art using my far-too-radiant beauty ability, this isn't all that bad."

"Sounds like your brain has been nicely fried. Think what you want, but face that way so I can check your back."

"Fine."

"By the way, are you really in middle school?"

"Can't you do this digitally!? I can feel all sorts of heat gathering inside me!!"

Even as she shouted in protest, Shokuhou somehow managed to carry out the "businesslike" work.

Specifically, she looked back down at her body and touched around with her palms to see if anything felt off.

(There really isn't anything.)

"Hm. Your skin is a lot shinier than I was expecting."

"Ah? Wait!"

"What do you use? It isn't oil. Is it a type of mud?"

"Wai-…! Don't run your finger down my back like that!!"

She shouted in anger and tried to turn around, but Kumokawa tightly grabbed her neck, ignored the #5's look of surprise, and spoke.

"Here it is."

"H-here what is?"

"Something's attached to the back of your neck. ...No, is it sticking into your neck? Don't move."

With that, Kumokawa grabbed something, or at least it felt that way.

Was something sticking into her?

After hearing that, Shokuhou imagined a small hook like an insect leg or an IC pin was digging into her skin.

However, the long pulling sensation that came afterwards froze her spine.

It was long. Very long.

It was like a hair had burrowed into the back of her neck.

“Got it.”

After hearing Kumokawa’s confirmation, Shokuhou turned around.

She held the object between her thumb and forefinger.

The main body was made of plastic and only a few millimeters long.

But something else continued below it.

The single fiber was thinner than a hair and she estimated it at more than twenty centimeters long. Had it extended up or down from the back of her neck? Neither option did anything to mitigate her fear.

“Put on your clothes. That’s indecent.”

Kumokawa gave that disinterested comment as she glanced down at the bizarre object between her fingers and she began to leave the changing room.

"W-wait! That's an important clue to solving the mystery of my memories!!"

"And I'm saying I'll look into it with all the power of the Board of Director's brain. Besides, what can you even do from here on? Perform an amateur online search? Do you think posting it on a question site will get you the answer right away?"

With that said, Kumokawa Seria truly did leave.

Shokuhou wanted to pursue her right away, but she could not in her current state of undress. She hurriedly put on her uniform and practically tackled open the door .

Kumokawa had already connected her handheld device to the living room computer and finished some sort of authentication process to access a database normal people were restricted from.

"You sounded pretty confident, but can you really figure this out?"

"Most of the time, people use illegal modified equipment. Killing someone with a registered weapon will get Anti-Skill knocking on your door right away, after all. But there's always a technology it's based on. If I check through the research that matches the materials, appearance, and functionality, I should find something."

She sounded proud of herself, but her fingers did not race across a keyboard like a hacker in a movie. She was apparently using some kind of program as an agent. When Shokuhou thought about it, Academy City was a collection of countless research institutions, so it would have a massive number of patents and academic papers. Rather than just let them pile up, they would need a specialized system for quickly searching for and finding them.

"Here we go."

Even with the automated selection of papers, she had over thirty given to her.

She rejected the ones that did not match and displayed the final remaining one.

"This is probably it. It's called a Strobila. The name apparently comes from one of the stages in a jellyfish's life cycle. This gives basic research theory on highly-accurate mental control of a human without interfering with the brain that is so closely related to esper development."

"Oh, so that's it."

"People's minds do not consist solely of the brain. In addition to the chemicals released there, your mind is influenced by the various hormones secreted by your other organs. In the Strobila's case, it stimulates the heart to alter the balance of secreted hormones and thus manipulate your mind without ever touching the brain. In that case, that fiber must have run all the way to your heart."

The very end of the paper suggested it could be used as a new restraint for out-of-control espers or a method of efficiently controlling the espers in juvenile hall, but those uses had likely been tacked on later. Researchers generally gave no thought to making compromises with society except when it came to getting funding.

"See? It really wasn't me."

"That's your fault for always sneaking around in the background. Even *he* called you a mysterious and creepy old woman who wore too much makeup and had disgusting lumps of fat."

"What!? H-he didn't, did he? You just tricked me, didn't you!? Not to mention that I thought we couldn't trust your memories!!"

Kumokawa Seria was brought to tears far more easily than anyone would have normally thought possible.

She just barely managed to recover from the shock and resumed explaining the specs of that strange device.

"I-if you look into the people connected to the research institution that developed the Strobila or anyone who could have stolen the data, you should reach the culprit behind this."

"Probably. I truly thank you for this," said Shokuhou.

However, her tone contained almost no ambition toward having something to do or anger at being used.

"But when was this attached to me?"

"Yeah, I don't like saying this kind of thing, but…"

"Go ahead."

"Since you had a Strobila or a derivative device attached, it would be best not to trust your memories and actions too much."

"I see."

Shokuhou took a small step back and brought a hand to her head.

Why had she wanted to search out the truth? It had not been to hunt down the creepy culprit and have them punished. It had been to find out that her memories with that boy were accurate and that the warmth inside her was real.

But that path had been cut off.

The memories inside her heart were all lies.

Her past with Kamijou Touma had never existed.

It was possible she could find the person behind it, reveal their conspiracy, crush the entire incident, and

ensure those who had trampled all over her memories experienced a living hell.

But what would that accomplish?

Were her feelings so trivial that this would erase them or replace them?

“What will you do? Now that we’ve removed the Strobila, you’ve left the culprit’s expectations. They might target you again, but for now, you’ve escaped the greatest threat. Will you continue on or turn back? It’s up to you.”

“You’re right.”

Shokuhou Misaki sounded weary and wilted as she replied.

“I’ll decide what to do from here on.”

Part 4

By the time Shokuhou Misaki left Kumokawa Seria’s faculty apartment, the night was growing late.

“Sigh.”

She had been unable to stop sighing for a while now.

“Queen.”

A member of her clique silently appeared and spoke to her.

It was the ringlet curl girl from before. Shokuhou had only asked for her help when the time came, but she had apparently been waiting all this time.

“You do not look very happy. Is something the matter?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“If you are in some kind of trouble, you only need to tell us what to do.”

“Yes, but unfortunately, working alone is best for now. If I really do need you, I won’t hesitate to give you an order.”

With that, Shokuhou disappeared into the dark streets.

The memories that had supported her more than any other had been created for someone else’s benefit.

Continuing to pursue the truth would only increase the risk and she would not find what she wanted there. Her hopes would be completely sidestepped.

She had left the Strobila with Kumokawa Seria.

That had surely been enough to tell that girl that Shokuhou was burned out.

(Really. What should I do now?)

That question was not only directed at her immediate situation.

On a much larger scale, where was she headed now? Would she continue to drag around those nonexistent memories of Kamijou Touma or…

(Or?)

The handbag hanging from her shoulder by a thin chain was her armory filled with remote controls, but it felt awfully heavy now.

Was there any point in holding onto false memories?

If someone had created them to manipulate her, wouldn't it be best to throw them away?

It would only take a single press of the button.

She only had to place the remote against her temple like committing suicide with a handgun.

It would be a simple reset.

"……
……
……"

She felt as if an unavoidably and hopelessly cold wind was passing through her body.

As she stood there, she felt as though, this time, she truly would lose sight of it all. With her greatest support and reference point lost, she did not know what to base her decision on.

Why not do it?

If it was a lie, why not make it a lie?

And if she could throw that away, was there anything in her own memories that would be even harder to part with?

She thought of her position as Tokiwadai's queen, the largest clique, her strongest mental powers, Dolly, the former ***** Project, before she came to this city, and her own birth.

Even if any of that was important, was it really important enough that she would not be able to throw it away if something like this happened?

And in that case, did she really need to keep those memories?

Wouldn't she be happier if she erased everything that fell into the category of "unnecessary"?

She normally would have laughed off that question, but now she could not deny it.

She no longer had what it took to do that.

"…"

She stood perfectly still for a long, long time.

Not even she knew how long she had been there.

However, a change finally came from outside.

She heard the sound of tires screeching along the ground and a white station wagon stopped nearby. The roof had red flashing lights attached, the back door normally meant for loading and unloading luggage rose straight up, and a few men in white coats exited while pushing a stretcher.

It reminded her of…

(An ambulance?)

"Are you Shokuhou Misaki of Tokiwadai Middle School?"

One of the men in white coats spoke to her while she watched in a daze.

"I am Yamakawa of Emergency Aid. Do I need to explain your situation and our duties?"

"Emergency Aid?" she repeated while thinking on the term. "Oh, you're those civilian ambulances. 119 was overburdened with all the pointless reports, so your

service was started to take on some of the work. Have you expanded into transporting out-of-control espers who the school infirmaries can't handle? After all, if the school doesn't call 119, there won't be an official record of the esper being taken to the hospital."

"We do not use the term 'out-of-control'. When drugs, electrodes, suggestion, and other methods are used to stimulate the brain for esper development during the already unstable hormone balance of adolescence, it is expected for a certain number of incidents to occur." The man calling himself Yamakawa mechanically rattled off this explanation. "We were unsure if we should head out in your case, but given the type and scope of your powers, we decided we could not ignore this. We have contacted your school and you will be transported to a facility inside the School Garden, so do not worry."

"Just out of curiosity, what triggered this?"

"When you trespassed on someone else's residence. All the wandering around you did earlier was also a hint of danger."

When she heard that, she gave up.

It was even possible Kumokawa Seria had noticed the abnormality and set this up.

"At any rate, please get inside. We would prefer not to strap you to the stretcher if at all possible."

"Thank you for your concern."

Whatever the case, she had to do something about the memories implanted inside her by the Strobila.

It did not matter if she erased them with her remote control suicide or through high-level treatment by the specialists at Emergency Aid.

It was time to say goodbye.

This was the perfect time.

She was not enough of a romantic to drag around false memories and hold onto a baseless admiration.

Pushed on by those thoughts, she prepared to enter the white station wagon.

But something occurred to her just before she did.

"Yamakawa-san was it?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"You said the trigger was my trespassing and how I was wandering around several hours ago."

"Yes?"

"*But that doesn't make sense.*"

She kept her head lowered as she spoke.

"If you knew I had trespassed, it means you knew from the beginning where I was going or had the ability to detect my location. But after sneaking into her place, I spent several hours of investigation before leaving. Just look how late it is."

"Shokuhou-san."

"That means you should have shown up earlier than this Since you didn't, I can only assume that trespassing was not the trigger. Perhaps it was-…"

"Shokuhou Misaki-san. Conspiracy theories and delusions of persecution are a common symptom. We

truly do not want to strap you down like some kind of spectacle, so please calm down."

"Perhaps it was this right here. You lost contact with the Strobila embedded in my neck here, so you came rushing out here. *That way you could embed a new one while disguising it as treatment*."

A loud sound of impact filled the area.

One of the men in white coats had snuck up behind Shokuhou Misaki, swung his long flashlight up like a baton, and slammed it down against the back of her head .

Or so he believed.

"Gah!?"

He had actually knocked out the man named Yamakawa.

She had altered his perception of the people around him.

In fact, all four or five men who claimed to be from Emergency Aid had been made to think a different person was Shokuhou Misaki.

She spun a remote around and muttered in annoyance.

“Well, I’m not going to make this easy for you.”

With several sounds much like beating a bag of wheat with a bat, they reduced their own numbers. After confirming they were no longer moving and that no reinforcements were coming, she stuck a hand in her handbag.

(I really don’t want to dive right into these dangerous people’s minds. I guess I’ll start by asking from the outside.)

“Category 081 / Shokuhou Misaki is Direct Superior A .”

“Get up. C’mon, get up. Hurry.”

She spoke slowly and kept her voice low, but that was enough for the man (supposedly) named Yamakawa to force open his own eyes. He could not stand up from the

road, but he groaned and worked to look Shokuhou in the eye.

It seemed his superior had thoroughly trained him.

“What are you doing there?”

“S-so-sorry! Shokuhou is… Damn, where’d she go!?”

“This is no time to be looking away. What did I assign you to do? Repeat it back to me.”

“Of course. I was told to quickly contact Shokuhou Misaki and attach a replacement for the Strobila that ceased functioning.”

“And what was that for?”

“I do not know. You said I did not need to know.”

Simply holding this conversation made her feel empty inside.

Her memories of Kamijou Touma really had not existed. The deeper she dug, she only found more of some lowly villain’s plan and was dragged further from her lovely memories with him.

What was the point of this?

A bitter feeling grew in her chest and she considered ending this, but he continued just before she did.

"But there was one odd fact about the Strobila you supplied. Are you sure it was set up right?"

"And what was that?"

She asked that question almost on autopilot.

And that was when the man calling himself Yamakawa dropped a bombshell.

"There was no data inside the Strobila. Even if we manage to attach it, I don't think it will function."

"……What?"

This time it really happened.

The situation really and truly surpassed anything she had imagined.

The Strobila given to Yamakawa and the others disguised as Emergency Aid had not contained any data. Even if they had secretly attached it, it could not have altered her mind or memories.

Then what about the one Kumokawa Seria had removed?

Their objective had to have been to return the situation to normal, so it made no sense for the new one to be empty when the original one actually did something. That meant she should assume the one Kumokawa had retrieved had been empty in the first place and they were returning the situation to normal by attaching another useless Strobila.

But what good did that do?

Why had they disguised themselves and contacted her only to attach a useless device to her?

“W-wait a minute! What do you mean? Why didn’t the Strobila have any data inside!?”

“Eh? So it really was a major mistake!?”

"Tell me the facts as plainly as you can!"

"O-of course. The Strobila you gave us had no data and neither did any of the backups. I sent a message asking if this was a problem, but the mission began before I received a reply."

It had not been just one without data and his question had gone unanswered.

That meant…

(It wasn't a mistake. It was set up that way from the beginning?)

"I see."

Shokuhou brought a hand to her forehead.

Filled with a certain type of conviction, she changed her question.

"In your opinion, what were the odds of success in this plan to manipulate Shokuhou Misaki using a Strobila? Can Mental Out be fully controlled with the power of a simple machine?"

"As long as you give the orders, I would even-…"

"Tell me the truth."

"The preliminary calculations suggested the odds were less than 30%. And even if it succeeded, it would have difficulty lasting long-term."

(I knew it.)

She reached her conclusion with the expression of someone who had just swallowed a mass of puss oozing from their own body.

(The Strobila was a decoy and their plan was to trick me into thinking those memories were false so I would erase them myself. That was how they would manipulate the mind of the most powerful mental esper. I can't think of any other reason to give me a Strobila with no data inside.)

Knowing the enemy's objective meant nothing to her.

A much more important fact lay before her eyes.

(*My memories with Kamijou Touma really were real. Otherwise, no one would go to this much effort to have me erase them!!*)

Something welled up within that girl's heart. It initially felt like a tiny, tiny point of light, but it quickly exploded and she found herself unable to control it.

First, she felt the muscles of her face tremble unnaturally and then relax.

The tremble tried to run down her spine and spread to her entire body, but she held her body in her arms to suppress it.

However, she failed to do that and she ended up lying on the ground and rolling back and forth.

"Hee hee"

She writhed around like a girl holding a stuffed animal in her bed and thinking about her crush.

"Ha ha ha. Ah ha ha ha

They saw great meaning in it.

"Now, I've overturned two major assumptions and circled 360 degrees to end up right back where I started♪ But what does that mean exactly?"

Also, this completely changed the overall picture.

The issue had started with the difference between the scenery in her mind and the actual artificial lake and geothermal power station tower on that District 21 mountaintop.

Such a large facility could not be rebuilt or demolished so easily. It would have had a large effect on the dam and observatory on the same mountain. Shokuhou had naturally assumed she was wrong and her memories with Kamijou Touma had not existed.

But what if she was right?

What if her memories with Kamijou Touma had existed?

(*That means the current artificial lake is wrong.*)

She did not know what that meant, but she felt as if the conspiracy surrounding her was directly connected to that unnatural power station and lake.

She turned to the man in a white coat who went by Yamakawa.

"Who am I?" she asked.

"I do not know your name," he immediately replied.

"?"

"Who are you?"

"Wait. I am your immediate superior, so we should see each other on a daily bas-…"

"You-yooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuuuu-you-you-you-you-you-you."

"Oh, honestly!!"

Once his ability to speak broke down, she frantically reached into her handbag, pulled out a variety remotes

for televisions or air conditioners, and lined them up on the road.

She would look after the people she controlled. That was a rule she had set for herself.

She checked the back of his neck, but he did not have a Strobila attached. However, his unnatural reaction made it clear he had some kind of “bomb” installed that had activated at a set keyword.

And if it was not a machine…

(Was it an esper like me? I can’t recommend peeking inside a contaminated mind like this, but I have no choice .)

“Category 005 / Locate the ‘bomb’ set in the indicated individual.”

For about ten seconds, she read his mind as if tracing her hand along its surface.

“Category 401 / Return the indicated individual’s mind to its state just before the ‘bomb’ activated.”

She restored his broken mind like using a computer's recovery system.

"Category 030 / Leave the indicated individual unconscious for twenty-four hours."

"Uuh, ah? What? You're Shokuho- gwah!?"

"Thank you for your cooperation."

He was then safely rendered unconscious with no lasting effects.

Mental Out's greatest weapon was its overwhelming power and number of applications. Of course, its great strength left even her unable to grasp its full scope without dividing it up using the remotes and her other personal rules.

"Helping someone who will never thank you feels so empty."

She did not know how much his mind had been contaminated, so she wanted to avoid diving deeper to search for the name of whoever was behind this.

But even though she did not investigate with her powers, she still made some guesses based on her knowledge and experience.

Yamakawa…no, all of those claiming to be with Emergency Aid may have been controlled by a single individual. They were given false identities, they had received false orders, and they had taken false actions.

That meant Yamakawa's observation about no data in the Strobila lost any credibility. Everything was reverted to a blank state.

Even so, the world seemed to have changed from before.

As before, the situation was 50/50. Her memories of Kamijou Touma were on the borderline between existing or not, but she had found something to investigate regardless.

(That geothermal power station and artificial lake in District 21.)

She had a clear objective and she faced forward once more.

(That is the center of the entire distortion. If my memories are accurate, there has to be something there. And if there isn't anything there, it will prove my memories are wrong. Either way, if I check there, I can settle this once and for all.)

She would use everything.

She would go all out.

With that in mind, she pulled out her cellphone.

She called a member of her clique. The gorgeous ringlet curl girl did not sound remotely irritated despite how late it was.

"Do you need us now, queen?"

"Yes."

That queen bee and #5 monster of Academy City did not hesitate to answer.

"I will now be using you completely and utterly for my own benefit♪ Can you gather together only those who are willing to be my pawns?"

That was all.

Nothing more was needed to set in motion a group of individuals who each had powerful and dangerous abilities.

Between the Lines 2

Overview of Ground Geo (For external PR)

Classification: Experimental geothermal power station.

Output: 2,027,000 kW.

Method: Deep magma heat conduction.

Location: District 21's New Mountain.

The facility far surpasses the output of a nuclear power station, but as the energy is directly extracted from the magma deep underground, it has no effect on the environment and is extremely clean.

The power is extracted using a method that has previously been considered in theory. Namely, a 1000

meter heat-conducting rod is placed vertically down from the mountain peak and the magma's heat is transferred through the liquid flowing within the rod.

We will only achieve what is perfectly natural. We hope you will view this as a high level of trust in the design and construction.

The primary problem is the production of extremely faint earthquakes that are too weak for people to feel, but they should not affect everyday life in any way.

The plan to place a heat-conducting rod deep underground was primarily seen as an experiment toward the future construction of a space elevator, but we assure you this will be even more valuable in a way.

The facility's greatest peculiarity is its high level of computer control. Normal operation is fully automated.

Every part of the facility is naturally monitored by a total of 32,000 sensors and the slightest abnormality will be immediately reported.

However, the fact that it has been running for more than three years without issue may prove just how flexible it is.

While previous geothermal power stations had to be constructed on active volcanoes that could grow unstable in the future, the heat-conducting rod method allows these facilities to be constructed in flat urban areas or even the ocean floor.

Just like the wind turbines that are Academy City's primary method, these facilities can be freely constructed anywhere and their applications are endless.

Chapter 3: True Motive >> Gallery — Another_Answer.

Part 1

Did she really have to go back there?

Annoyance filled Shokuhou Misaki as she imagined the path back to the power station and artificial lake in the mountains of District 21. For an instant – truly just an instant – she seriously considered controlling twenty or so people and creating a luxurious palanquin for herself, but she rejected the idea at the last second. Even she had a concept of shame appropriate for her age.

While gasping for breath on the winding and pitch-black mountain path, she held her phone to her ear.

“I looked into it some more since you left, but Ground Geo is definitely the one you saw,” said Kumokawa Seria . “I checked the construction blueprint, the photos attached to the basic overview, and even the government office bulletins that no one would normally be able to see , but it all matches. Or at least, all the official records depict it that way.”

"Hm? That was an odd way of putting that."

"All of the documents my searches turned up had their 'last modified' dates altered. It looks like all of those were actually put in quite recently. What do you think about that?"

"It's hard to say."

A few days ago, she might have been overjoyed and latched onto this news.

She would have seen the evidence of altered data as proof that her memories were accurate.

"If they could change those dates, we can't be certain about what you say 'actually' happened either, can we? It 's possible someone in the past added in the data with the time set to the future"

"True."

"Also, we can't say altering data is the same as altering the truth. They might have overwritten the accurate data with identical accurate data. That way I would assume the data is false when I found the evidence of their altering ability."

She had already seen the Strobila and Emergency Aid.

She still did not know who the enemy was or the full scope of the incident, but she needed to assume this much given what she did know.

When you took the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse of the reverse, did you end up with the original or the reverse?

"At any rate, the altered files were classification rank S . Whoever they are, they can easily reach a level a step beyond the highest classification level known to the public. They've clearly broken away from their loyalty to the Board of Directors. I can't tell if this is real or a bluff, but I do know they have the power and conviction to do something like this for nothing but a step in their preparations. You should be careful."

"I already know that." Shokuhou elegantly wiped sweat from her brow with a handkerchief. "Besides, this already went well past my predictive ability from the

moment someone knew enough about the incident with that boy to pull off an attack like this. I will not be foolish enough to look down on them."

"I don't really care about you or anything, but he isn't strong enough to handle someone's death. So don't go off and die. If you do die, I'll give you the proper decorations, so make sure you contact me."

"That goes for both of us"

With a quiet laugh, Shokuhou Misaki ended the call.

She then stared into empty space and muttered in her heart.

(When did she gain that impudent skill for being tsundere?)

Thinking about it was not going to give her an answer and it disturbed her to get too involved with that older, large-breasted tsundere who was actually an immature old hag who refused to grow up. Shokuhou decided spending any more thought on this was a waste of her time and so changed her train of thought.

She could see the artificial lake and tower now.

The facility was so massive that it was difficult to hide. Normally thinking, it would be impossible to remove it without affecting the surroundings at all. The fact that it looked so very different from her past made it the singularity for her personal mystery and contradiction.

It was supposedly constantly monitored by countless cameras and sensors, but all she saw from the outside were a metal fence surrounding the lake and a gate sealed with chains and a padlock.

Whether it had changed form or not, it was still the place she had once wandered into and collapsed on the ground.

Despite her miniskirt, she climbed over the gate and inside.

There, she walked along the concrete shore.

"…"

Even this created an intense discrepancy between her memories and reality.

It was not that a specific aspect was wrong; she was having trouble finding anything that was the same.

And that went beyond the lake. When she looked over her shoulder and down from the mountaintop, it was blatantly obvious that the shape of the dark forest and mountains were completely wrong (or that her memories were). The locations of the rising surfaces of rock and the taller trees were clearly different.

(Of course, landslides and development can easily change the natural landscape, so it isn't that strange for it to differ from my memories.)

She removed her glove and traced her fingers across the ground, but she found no information connecting it to that day. Her mindreading power was no comfort.

Even so, she faced forward again.

She looked to the circular lake surrounded by concrete and the metal tower standing up from the center.

This was where she had sprawled out on the ground back then.

It was the exact spot where she had met the boy named Kamijou Touma.

But this spot was no exception.

"It's different too," she muttered aloud without thinking.

At the very least, nothing she could see matched her memories. The difference was so thorough to make it almost refreshing.

She tried lying down just like on that day.

Not only were the lake and forest different, but the locations of the stars were too.

(Well, that was summer and this is winter, so the constellations will naturally be different.)

She made that decision and then reached a conclusion.

When something was different, there was a reason for it. This discrepancy between her memories and reality would not happen for no reason. Were her memories

wrong or was the scene before her eyes wrong? And was it intentional or coincidental? Setting all that aside, she knew there was a cause somewhere.

She then sat straight up.

She reached for a cheap plastic bag from a discount store that she had brought along with her handbag. It contained an item she had bought earlier.

It was a twelve-piece screwdriver set.

In addition to different Phillips head and flathead varieties, it included one for removing frames that resembled an awl. She removed it from the case.

She brushed her palm across the area she had just been lying on.

She felt the solid sensation of concrete. It absorbed the chill of the late night mountain air and seemed to reject the warmth needed for life.

And then she swung down the awl as if hammering in a metal nail.

Normally, she would never have been able to pierce the concrete meant to hold in the massive amount of water filling the artificial lake. Even if she slammed a hammer against the bottom of it, the cheap screwdriver would have broken first.

But her wrist felt an odd sensation much like something crumbling.

It was like the sensation of hardened sand losing its form.

"I knew it," muttered Academy City's #5 Level 5.

This had actually completely fooled her and filled her with confusion, so that comment was disingenuous. However, this was the only method she could think of that could have actually fooled her.

She pinched the crumbled sand between her thumb and forefinger and rubbed the fingers together to feel it. Meanwhile, she looked back across the lake.

She looked at the giant concrete structure and the dark forest and mountain surrounding it.

She looked at all of it.

"That's right. *The entire landscape visible from here was transformed by covering it with this*."

Competition to be named the standard occurred with any technology and it had occasionally occurred in the television industry.

A certain technology had competed with OLEDs before quietly vanishing from the stage.

That technology was magnetically-controlled monitors .

Whether CRT or LCD, the standard television used the RGB color system or added in black for a four-color composition. On the other hand, the magnetically-controlled monitors constructed the image using the CMYK structure.

The basic idea was simple. A fine powder given the basic colors was mixed into an ultra-thin water tank and magnetism was used to manipulate them and form the image.

Due to the method, it produced no blue light and it could more accurately reproduce watercolor or oil paintings than a traditional television, so they held overwhelming possibility for educational programs providing an introduction to art. However, the cost for a single unit was too expensive and the producers and distributors were used to the traditional RGB coloration, so they lost the competition to become the standard for television. Incidentally, that unknown television technology had later been used in an entirely different field.

Namely, military camouflage.

The pattern could change in real-time just like a television and the bright colors did not require a backlight as LCDs did, so they had become the next generation of high-tech deception.

"That was placed over everything I can see from here," muttered Shokuhou Misaki half in annoyance.

Even her mindreading powers had found nothing about that day in the lake or even the surrounding

guardrail. But that was not because reality had changed. It was due to the magnetically-controlled monitor powder covering it all.

Even if the infrastructure for mass-production was established with a large-scale factory, it was feared a single television would have cost over a million yen. And yet the basic component for those televisions had been spread all across the mountains visible from here.

"They certainly went a long way to mess with a girl's memory. Well, that must mean they actually have the ability to see the true value of the #5."

At any rate, her memories had not been wrong.

The lake had looked exactly as she remembered. She had only thought it had changed because it had been overwritten by massive amounts of a camouflaging substance.

However, this would not happen on its own.

Someone had done this.

And would they merely accept that she had found the truth?

The answer was a resounding no.

This was where it truly began. The enemy would contact her no matter what now.

Part 2

Just as Shokuhou Misaki expected, someone began to move.

Academy City's #5 Level 5 was sometimes told her body did not look like a middle schooler's and the same could be said of this person.

However, it was meant in the exact opposite way here.

Labored breathing filled a vehicle.

The forty foot container was pulled by a large truck and was by no means small. In the West, it was not uncommon for people to make similar modifications and then live in them. Even if it had been built here to constantly monitor District 21's Ground Geo and the area around the power plant, the intense oppressive feeling undoubtedly came from the girl's appearance.

She may have weighed as much as three hundred kilograms.

The Tokiwadai Middle School uniform was pulled tight and looked about to burst.

Not only did she have no division between face and neck, her silhouette even had an unclear division between face and shoulders.

Her breathing sounded so labored because her own flesh was crushing her windpipe.

"Hee hee. Doo hoo hoo. …Ahh, ahh. So she has at last crossed the final line. Now I can't back off either."

In strange news stories from the West, one would occasionally hear about people who grew too fat to walk on their own and had to be rescued because they were too big to fit through the door and leave their own house.

This girl looked like she fit that description.

With a wet dripping sound, this thing that had lost all resemblance to a girl licked her lips. While continuing to have trouble breathing despite no one strangling her, she gave a laugh that seemed crushed by her own flesh.

She grabbed a headset with a sweaty hand and placed it against one ear. The action resembled a DJ from an older era, but she had no other choice because the standard equipment was too small for her head.

"Wheeze wheeze… How goes the OS's synchronization?"

"It is running smoothly."

"And the other one?"

"The capture was somewhat rushed, so it will take a little longer to test it and make sure the various sensors don't cause any conflicts."

"How much longer? Cough cough."

"My estimate is forty minutes at the most."

"Then…cough…that's fine. But try to force it through ahead of schedule."

With that, she tossed the headset aside.

Her eyes turned to one of the countless monitors on the container's wall.

Shokuhou Misaki was displayed there.

That girl had just regained her life and looked brighter than anything else in the world.

"You have still stolen 'me'."

She used her partially-crushed vocal cords to speak in a very, very low voice that just about left the audible range.

"So it is time you were punished, Miss Bee."

Part 3

When Shokuhou Misaki first noticed something was off, she thought it might be a breeze. That was because a wave ran through the entire scene just like unseen wind blowing through wheat.

But that was not right.

This was not a field filled with wheat; it was the thick concrete shore of an artificial lake. The wind would not be enough to create a wave there.

Her common sense rejected the scene before her, but her knowledge soon told her that common sense did not apply.

The scenery around her was technically a collection of magnetically-controlled monitor powder. Everything she could see was a giant screen that could display any image.

"…!! They're already here!!"

She took a few steps back, tossed aside the screwdriver set, and reached for the handbag on her shoulder. She selected the remote she wanted by touch alone.

Her opponent responded.

With the sound of scattering sparks, a portion of the scenery burst. Less than ten meters in front of Shokuhou stood what looked like a giant mass of flesh.

"Bahh," said the figure jokingly.

Shokuhou did not hesitate to pull the remote from her bag.

Like a fast draw from a western, she used her thumb to spin the volume dial on an audio set remote.

“Category 330 / Prevent the indicated individual from detecting the passage of time for sixty minutes.”

But…

“That won’t work”

She heard a voice, but it came from directly behind her .

“What!?”

(Was the figure approaching from the front just an image!? Can the powder create sound and voices by rubbing together like a cricket’s wings!?)

She frantically turned around and a mass of flesh surrounded by feminine subcutaneous fat filled her vision.

But that was not just because the figure was so close.

This person had to weigh two hundred or even three hundred kilograms. It was doubtful she could even walk on her own and she wore the same Tokiwadai uniform as Shokuhou, but it almost looked like someone had drawn the uniform on a balloon before inflating it. At first, Shokuhou had not recognized the uniform that was about to burst from within.

Looking like that, Shokuhou was certain she would have at least heard of this person even if she was in a different class or year.

And so she asked a natural question.

"*Are you really in middle school?*"

"Heh heh heh. *I could ask you the same thing.*"

Shokuhou felt like the figure's oddly sweet tone of voice was an imitation of her own, so an unpleasant feeling rushed across her entire body.

She took a few steps back with uncertain footing.

She moved away without even thinking about it.

What was this thing?

Academy City's #5 once more pointed the audio set remote at her target.

"I already told you that won't work," said the mocking voice. "If I thought it would, I would never actually show myself to you, now would I?"

Shokuhou heard a bizarre sound like gathering static electricity or an old CRT TV being switched on.

"What?"

Her right arm changed color up to the shoulder.

The glove and sleeve of her winter uniform blazer did too. A shiny black pattern covered her arm as if someone had drawn a marble pattern with sticky heavy oil.

Next, "it" arrived.

The low rumble resembled the previous static electricity sound, but it was something else.

This was the sound of countless insect wings.

It was a swarm of giant hornets that could attack as a group and even kill a large bear to protect their hive. There were a thousand or maybe even more and they rushed at Shokuhou with the density of a sandstorm. Specifically, they rushed at her right arm.

"Did you know? Hfh gfh. *Even children know that giant hornets will gather on black things.*"

"You…!!"

"And Mental Out only works on people. It's useless against a military dog or a swarm of insects. Isn't that right?"

Meanwhile, the swarm of hornets the size of her thumb approached to envelop her.

But a moment later, orange light flashed in the late night.

An incredibly powerful mass of flames appeared in empty space and intercepted the swarm of hornets. The insects were roasted in an instant and their corpses fell while twinkling like sparks.

However, not even Shokuhou's Mental Out allowed her to use a different esper power with a remote.

So what had happened?"

"Doo hoo hoo. Found one in the forest."

The mass of flesh laughed.

Shokuhou followed her gaze and saw someone trying to hide by slipping between the trees that swayed in the night wind. However, that single portion of the dark forest changed to a neon pink. The pink formed an accurate circle with a five meter radius. It was much like a painted-on spotlight marker.

"I believe you can only accurately control about fourteen people at once. All of your hidden pawns are powerful espers, aren't they? Now, where are the others hidden? Once I cut off all your arms and legs, only the head will remain. Only the brain that can't even crawl along the ground."

"Category 330 / Prevent the indicated individual from detecting the passage of time for sixty minutes."

Shokuhou ignored her and turned the remote's dial.

The enemy's giant round head shook back and forth.

But…

"I already told you," continued the voice. "That won't work"

"You're…kidding."

(This one isn't an image made with the display ability of the magnetically-controlled monitor. I really truly did activate the remote toward her. Does that mean…my power really doesn't work on her!?)

Before she could gather her thoughts, the next oddity attacked her.

A swarm of tiny insects crawled up from her feet and toward her neck. An indescribable sense of revulsion travelled from her fingertips and up her spine.

"No, this is just paint made to look like that!"

"Well spotted. But there is such a thing as a primitive fear you can't avoid even if you know it isn't real. The

descriptions of the hallucinations had during withdrawal can be used to analyze a 'pattern of fear' common to the entire human race."

The talking lump of flesh shook oddly.

A moment later, a giant eyeball appeared on the swollen flesh.

As soon as its gaze pierced through her, Shokuhou almost stopped breathing. She seriously felt the movements of her diaphragm slow from a mere mental attack.

"Ah…kah…!?"

"All girls love Greek mythology which we're familiar with from astrology, but that mythology also included Medusa. You know, the female snake monster known for her petrifying eyes."

This intentionally "transformed" person gave a thin, thin smile.

"But that wasn't originally a story of eyeballs with a mysterious power. Medusa was a former beauty who was cursed by a god and given a face too horrifying to

behold. The fear that filled anyone who saw it would make them freeze up *as if they had turned to stone*. But that was too boring, so it changed to the story of eyes that truly turned people to stone."

The idea of a woman with a horrifying face or a beauty waving her hair around in anger was one of the "patterns of fear" seen around the world. In Japan for example, the traditional art of Noh included a mask called the Hannya . It was a representation of the frightening yet uniquely bewitching side of a beauty dyed in the colors of rage.

This was the extreme representation of that.

The visual fear that everyone held had been drawn out and transformed into a technology to drive that fear into a target's heart.

"Gasp…gasp!?"

"Keh heh heh. Ha ha ha ha!! I see you're finally talking like me, Miss Bee."

Shokuhou ignored the mocking laughter and doubled over.

She clenched her teeth and made up her mind.

A roar burst out a moment alter.

A tremendous impact struck the entire area, including Shokuhou and her enemy.

A trembling pain ran up from her feet and spread from her bones and into the surrounding flesh. This was electricity. For an instant, the magnetically-controlled monitor dust lost control. With the sound of a sandbag's contents spilling everywhere, the insects crawling on Shokuhou and the giant eyeball both vanished.

"Gyah!? Keh heh heh. But now I've found the second."

The enemy produced a wet sound while trembling.

Another portion of the scenery turned an unnatural neon pink.

"How many more? As long as I know where they are, I can go crush them. You may arrogantly control people, but you couldn't stand to see one of them die, could you? Now, how much longer can you maintain control of your pawns?"

"…!!"

"Oh? Does that look on your face mean you ordered them all to withdraw? That only saves me the trouble."

Shokuhou Misaki could only wonder who this enemy was.

Even after all this, she had no idea who the girl could be.

Even with all this technology, outdoing Mental Out in psychological warfare was not normal. To Shokuhou's knowledge, only Kumokawa Seria could pull that off. That was why she always kept tabs on that girl's actions. She did not know what kind of life this person lived, but Shokuhou's network would have caught her if she used this kind of power on a daily basis.

Also, this enemy was too familiar with Shokuhou's personal past and the loopholes in her powers. Was she simply a dedicated stalker or…

"Do you have some connection to me?"

"Heh heh heh hah hah!! Cough, cough. Of course I do. Geh heh heh. Otherwise, I would have no reason to resent you!!"

"But I've never seen you. I don't know who you are."

"Doo hoo hoo!! Of course you don't. If you had ever met me, I wouldn't have been able to resist killing you then."

Their lives were closely related, but they had never met before.

They had never seen each other before, but intense hatred had grown within this girl.

After going over the available information, Shokuhou came to a conclusion.

"You really are insane."

"Gyaaa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! That's the thing! That's the thing, Miss Bee! People like me… People like *us* readily manipulate people's minds, so who can prove we still have sound minds of our own!?"

Shokuhou did not bother hearing her out.

With the useless remote in her hand, she faced the mass of flesh head on.

Of course, the enemy noticed and calmly began to alter the surrounding magnetically-controlled monitor.

But first, Shokuhou threw the remote toward the mass of flesh's face with all her strength.

"Wha-…!? Abhah!?"

"Why do you look so shocked? Since you *set foot in my memories with him*, you should know these remotes can be used like this."

Shokuhou approached as she spoke.

She reached into her bag, pulled out another remote, and threw it. In truth, Shokuhou had difficulty even throwing a plastic bottle in the trash, but she managed fine here. The target was simply that large.

As the dull sounds of impact continued, the mass of flesh gave a short cry and tried to cover her face with her hands. This may have been a shockingly pathetic fight from a combat professional's point of view, but Shokuhou knew anyone who took the easy route by

controlling people's minds would not bother to train their body. All the while, she made her way closer and closer.

She knew what she had to do.

(Even if something seems mysterious at first glance, it isn't just a vague and mysterious phenomenon. Just like the lake was covered by the transformation ability of the magnetically-controlled monitor, there has to be reason my powers don't work on her.)

Her opponent was easily three hundred kilograms. Classes of martial arts were divided by weight because differences in body size could sometimes mean more than the presence of a deadly weapon. However, Shokuhou did not hesitate. She doubted the bloated girl before her had a method of transferring her weight into destructive power.

(And I've already seen a technology that could provide a resistance to my Mental Out, even if the odds of success were low.)

Her goal was the mass of flesh's neck.

More accurately, the back of the neck.

She accurately grabbed a small plastic point attached like a larval jellyfish.

"A Strobila. You tried to trap me using this, didn't you !?"

She pulled with all her might.

The terminal was apparently attached directly to her heart, but Shokuhou had experienced the same thing and so showed no concern for her opponent.

And…

"Category 011 / The indicated individual must answer accurately to all questions."

"Ah…gah!?"

The mass of flesh let out a short and thick cry, but that was all she could manage.

She stopped moving and a dead look entered her eyes.

That was the sign that this still-unknown enemy had finally, finally, finally fallen under Mental Out's control.

Part 4

Shokuhou Misaki spun the television remote in her hand.

The three hundred kilogram girl stood stock-still in front of her. She moved back and forth in front of that enemy while trying to gather her thoughts a little.

But she simply could not gather them.

Everything this enemy had said had made no sense whatsoever.

"I guess I'll just have you give me some spoilers for everything I don't understand"

She stopped the spinning remote, pointed it forward, and asked a question while pressing the button.

"Are you the one behind this? Or is there someone beyond even you?"

"No, I am the deepest point. I was the only one – cough – giving orders."

It seemed the coughing was legit and not just an act.

"What is the backbone of your power?"

"I work alone. I simply control useful-looking people from valuable underground organizations, research institutions, prestigious schools, and the like to give the illusion of an organization."

"And how do you control them?"

"Five Over OS."

"Be more specific."

"A Five Over is a military technology that reproduces a Level 5's power with pure industrial technology. However, OS stands for Outsider, so it exists outside that mainstream method. Simply put, it uses techniques fundamentally different from the Level 5's power to produce a phenomenon resembling the Level 5's power."

(I see. So the concept behind this large-scale magnetically-controlled monitor might be a version of me using a different method.)

Shokuhou Misaki directly manipulated the internal structure of the human brain.

However, the “knowledge” within the larger category of one’s “personality” was defined as that which adapted to an unknown environment. There was a report that sounded more like a dubious urban legend that said, if a human was closed inside a pitch-black and empty room, their personality would collapse within only a few days.

That was the opposite of Shokuhou’s process.

Instead of controlling the mind from within, they would thoroughly decorate the external world to convince someone the contents of their mind were wrong .

It was the same thing Shokuhou had experienced at the artificial lake.

“Why did you do this?”

“For revenge. To punish you for stealing ‘me’.”

“Be more specific.”

“I do not think I can retrieve ‘me’. I am simply fighting to satisfy myself.”

Her responses were too abstract.

But if that was what she believed, no more information could be drawn from her.

Also, Shokuhou had forgotten to ask the most important question.

"Who are you?"

"I…"

Shokuhou's powers meant the enemy had to answer accurately to any question asked of her. That could not be fought with willpower and the Strobila had already been removed.

That meant it was impossible for her to lie.

And yet…

"I am Shokuhou Misaki. I am here to take revenge on you for stealing me."

Part 5

She did not understand what that meant.

Part 6

Shokuhou Misaki's legs and mind grew unsteady.

The massive three hundred kilogram girl still stood in front of her and she had called herself Shokuhou Misaki. They looked nothing alike and anyone asked if they did would have asked if you were joking, but Shokuhou herself knew better than anyone that this girl could not lie.

In that case, what did she mean?

What was that answer?

"Wait! Wait a second! You're Shokuhou Misaki? Do you really think that?"

"Yes."

"Then who am I? Who is the person everyone else believes is Shokuhou Misaki?"

"I do not know. I thought I would reveal her true identity here."

"But…but you can't be Shokuhou Misaki. Shokuhou Misaki is more beautiful and cute! She has a figure

anyone would be jealous of and she shines all the way to the tips of her nails!"

"It is not my fault I ended up like this. It was the malice of a third party that turned me into this."

"…"

She could not think of anything else to ask.

What was this?

That girl was under an inviolable rule forcing her to accurately answer all questions, so she could not lie. This was not a lie, but it was a delusion far removed from reality. So did this girl truly believe this delusion?

Or…

Or…?

(No, wait! Wait, wait! Don't let her trick you. Or rather , don't get swallowed up in her delusion. No one would let something like this be a transformed Shokuhou Misaki. Besides, I have Mental Out. This's the power of Academy City's #5 Level 5 and it can't be mass-produced . It proves I'm the real one beyond a shadow of a doubt.)

But did it really?

What if the Strobila in her neck had not been a method of avoiding Shokuhou's attack and it had instead been used by a third party to restrain her power?

And it had already been proven that the Strobila or Five Over OS could control a human mind on a high level without relying on Level 5 powers.

What if some strange technique had been used without her knowledge?

No.

What if she had been under that technique's control and she had only thought she was controlling others?

"……
……
……"

What was it?

What was the answer?

Which one was the real Shokuhou Misaki? Was there any way of objectively proving it one way or the other with only the two of them here? She of course truly believed that she was Shokuhou Misaki, but what value did that belief or her memories hold when faced with techniques of freely manipulating the human mind? If she overturned all of her assumptions, could she even say who she really was?

Just like that, a disturbing sense of floating assaulted whoever she was.

But then a supposedly impossible voice reached her ears.

"*Just kidding.*"

A mocking voice came from the motionless mass of flesh.

That alone was enough to overturn Shokuhou's assumptions, but the next thing she knew, something long and thick yet obviously not a rope had wrapped tightly around her body.

"What!?"

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha!! Gefh, geheh. I already told you! I already tolllld you! How many times do I have to say it? Your powers don't work on me!!"

Tremendous pressure squeezed at Shokuhou's organs.

And as she struggled to breath, she saw something.

The three hundred kilogram girl's flesh split open at the wrist and something flew out. Overall, it was cream-colored. It was a joint-less, flexible manipulator arm with countless suckers covering it just like an octopus or squid tentacle.

Five_Over (Out_Sider).

Modelcase_"MENTAL_OUT".

Shokuhou's face froze when she saw those words written on the cream-colored side.

"Designers' Gel. That's the name of this artificially redesigned fat."

Shokuhou had forgotten until now.

The Five Over OS would need a base unit like a powered suit.

It would have to be hidden somewhere.

"The 'ink' that sprayed out on my command is part of it too, you know?"

With a sticky sound, something clearly split off from the three hundred kilogram girl. It was a yellowish cream-colored object much taller than a person. Countless tentacles extended from the bottom half of the giant sphere, so it looked something like an artificial octopus.

This was Five Over OS – Modelcase Mental Out.

The surface of the round head-like body had large eyeballs written on it like hieroglyphics. Perhaps using the magnetically-controlled monitor, those drawn eyeballs rolled about and even blinked.

Shokuhou was still restrained by one of its tentacles, but she was focused on something other than the bizarre technology.

She was focused on the obese girl…no, on the girl who had worn that artificial fat.

"Heh heh."

The far-too-big Tokiwadai uniform fell to her ankles and revealed a special outfit that resembled a racing swimsuit and looked like thin rubber made to match a human silhouette.

But other than that, the girl standing before her was Shokuhou Misaki. The long honey-blonde hair, the plentiful breasts that looked out-of-place on a middle school girl, the narrow waist, the long legs, and everything else were the same as the ones she saw in the mirror every morning.

As she watched in a daze, that face suddenly melted away.

It was like a collection of giant leeches or slugs had been forcibly shaped into a human face. While watching her own face crumble away and splat onto the ground, Shokuhou let out a cry.

"Who in the world are you!?"

"You still don't know?"

With that reply, the grotesque cascade of flesh suddenly stopped.

The magnetically-controlled monitor dust attached to the other girl's body burst away in an instant.

This time, her true face was revealed.

"Eh?"

Shokuhou Misaki spoke in confusion.

The girl did not resemble her at all. Her chocolate-colored hair was as fluffy as cotton candy which was the exact opposite of Shokuhou's straight honey-blonde hair. Shokuhou's breasts were larger, but the other girl's legs were more beautiful. They were more than just long and slender and Shokuhou honestly felt she had lost to the flowing lines of this other girl's legs.

Altogether, this was a complete stranger.

And yet she sensed something familiar in this girl that she had never sensed in anyone else before.

She could not put it to words and not even she could quite grasp what it was.

"You are similar."

She gave voice to this powerful sense of unease.

"You are undoubtedly similar."

"Of course I am."

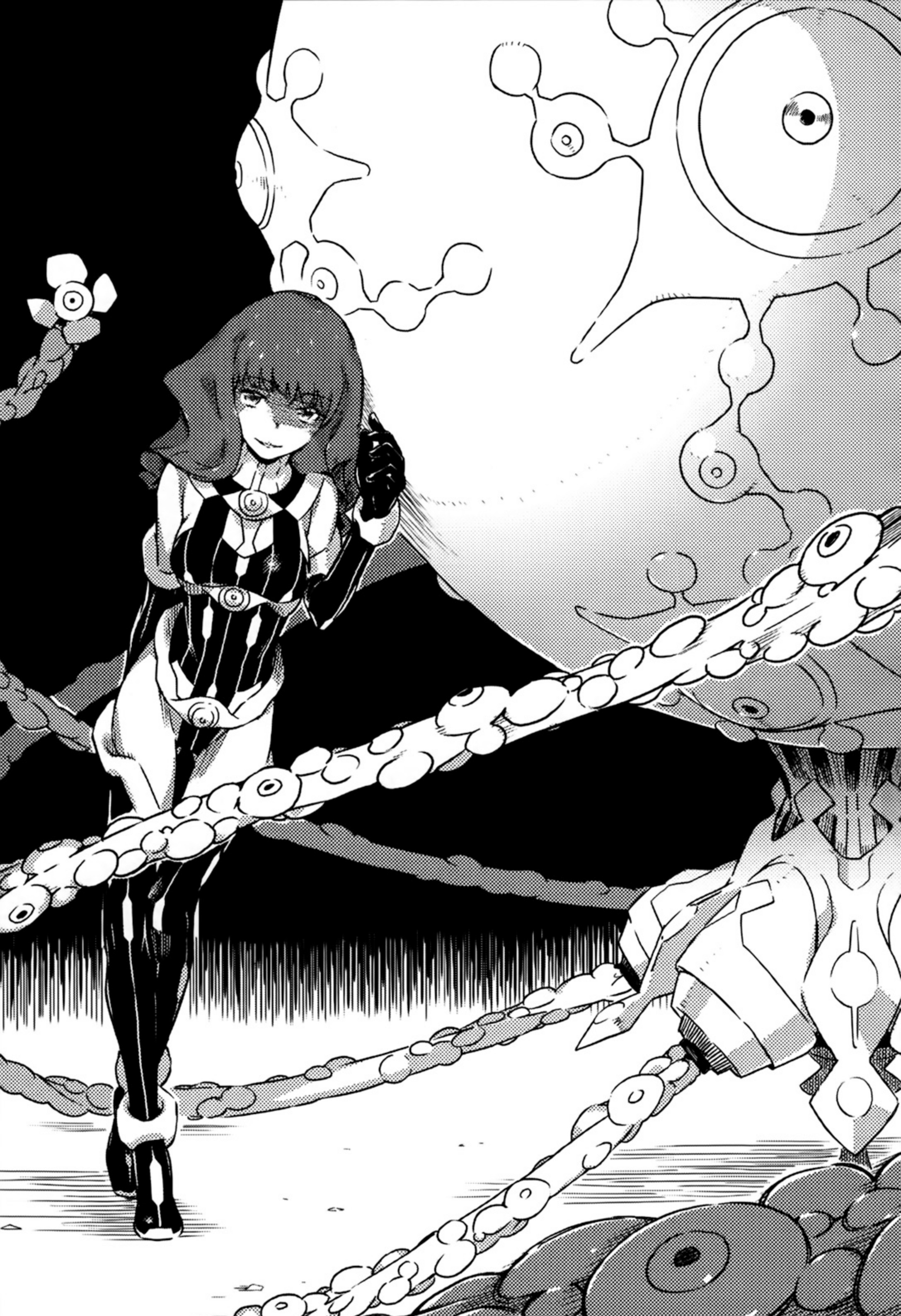
The other girl replied with a slight smile.

"My power is Mental Stinger. I'm stuck at Level 3 now , but I was originally meant to reach Level 5."

"Eh?"

"There is a secret file known as the Parameter List. It is an internal document used to pick favorites. It tells them whose powers to develop and whose to give up on for the sake of research, for the sake of profit, for the sake of developing the human race, and just for the sake of what the adults want. Have you heard of it?"

Shokuhou recalled what this girl had said.



They had never met, but she hated Shokuhou to the point of wanting to kill her.

They had never seen each other before because she would have killed Shokuhou right then and there if they had.

"I am Mitsuari Ayu, the ant who could not become the bee."[1]

That was what had happened here.

Sometimes, people would take someone's life from them without ever even passing them in the hall or seeing them. They could be the loser in an idol audition or the person whose lottery number was just slightly off.

Had this girl been caught up in a similar situation?

"And I am the other fruit that was cut from the branch in order to let you grow."

Between the Lines 3

Confidential.

For the Board of Directors.

I have received an interim report on Shokuhou Misaki and Mitsuari Ayu, so I am submitting it to you.

The old theory that they were controlling bioelectricity has been proven false. We have learned they actually manipulate moisture to produce a variety of phenomena.

Primarily, they control the secretion of chemicals in the target's brain and control the distribution of blood, cerebrospinal fluid, etc. in the brain. Rather than directly controlling the bioelectricity, it seems they change the conductive efficiency by controlling the fluid that acts as a catalyst for the electricity to flow through.

As such, there seem to be cases when their powers do not function against espers who can directly manipulate their bioelectricity, such as Electromasters. However, some speculate they would be able to force their way through that defense by raising their power.

Their method of reading minds without relying on another's brain is likely also related to moisture.

Based on their genetic information and their school counseling, we can find no points in common between

their bodies or minds. Nevertheless, the basic theory and scope of the power that has manifested in them is almost identical and the Tree Diagram has given both of them the possibility of reaching Level 5.

(*Important Note: This point holds the possibility of overturning the fundamental idea of researching the brain to develop esper powers. The brain is a necessary component, but there may be more than just that. I hope you treat this part especially carefully.)

While this is an extremely unique situation, the two of them will end up plateauing at around Level 3 if they are given the standard Curriculum.

We must prune one of them and focus on the other.

We must make the decision before they enter the harsh hormone fluctuations of adolescence to ensure their talent is not crushed.

To decide between Shokuhou Misaki and Mitsuari Ayu, please reference the attached Parameter List.

And whichever one is chosen as the master, I recommend leaving the other as a slave. If the master happens to die, the equipment and funding focused on

her can be reinvested into the slave for a second chance at developing a Level 5 under the same circumstances.

Chapter 4: Chance Meeting >> Audience Chamber — Duel_in_the_Mind.

Part 1

Bees and ants.

They were both known as insects with a high level of society centered around a queen (although a lot of bees lived solitary lives), but the species were actually extremely closely related. By the technical definition, they both belonged to the Hymenoptera order.

But that did not mean they could coexist.

The fiercer bees or wasps would attack ants and the more clever species would even lay their eggs in the ants' underground colony. Ants on the other hand would mercilessly swarm a bee that lost its strength and fell to the ground and they would carry its corpse back to their colony.

These two separated girls may have been similar.

The Five Over OS was made up of an artificial fat called Designers' Gel. That wearable weapon resembled

a giant cream-colored octopus and one of its tentacles was wrapped around Shokuhou Misaki's body.

"Our relationship might be similar to Shirai Kuroko and Musujime Awaki's," said the girl named Mitsuari Ayu.

She gave a smile that did not at all match her appearance and she pulled out a palm-sized smartphone as if preparing for a card trick.

"It was not the Strobila or the Five Over OS that deflected your power. My power may be weaker than yours, but it is the same. All I did was use it to obstruct the interference you caused"

As she spoke, the number of smartphones grew.

It was reminiscent of all the remotes Shokuhou used.

"So that's why you've directed all your hatred ability my way?"

Shokuhou groaned while held by the giant tentacle that looked like it could crush a small car like balling-up a tissue.

"Everything was chosen based on some file called the Parameter List and our futures were decided based on what the adults wanted, so you're the victim and I'm the culprit?"

"What about it?"

Shokuhou wondered what she would have done if the situation had been reversed.

What if some stranger she had never even met had used her as a stepping stone and stolen every possibility from her?

What if her talent had been crushed?

What if she had never been allowed in Tokiwadai Middle School?

What if she had not been a Level 5?

After considering that, the girl named Shokuhou Misaki spoke.

"Are you an idiot? That's nothing more than an excuse for falling to a life of crime."

Mitsuari remained smiling.

And while smiling, a disturbing spasm came over her face at not quite her temple and not quite her cheek. It was as if small insects were running around below the skin.

Shokuhou ignored it and continued.

She found herself able to ignore it.

"Your success was stolen from you? You had talent, but you weren't placed on the proper stage? *You can find similar situations anywhere you look.*"

"…"

"Do you think every country can provide their Olympic athletes the same funding and equipment? How many countries do you think want to go to space but can't carry out realistic space development? It isn't rare for competitions to be influenced by more than just one's pure skill. Competing in the exact same environment and under the exact same conditions is something you only see in the lukewarm miniature gardens adults prepare for children. That only applies to school tests that have no bearing on your actual life."

Her words stabbed out at the other girl.

Her words mocked this girl who had lost her way.

And those clear words continued.

"But it's human nature that leads us to win regardless. If doing everything right isn't enough to win, the winners will work two or even three times as hard. They' ll show off what they can do by with a method no one else had thought of. That's what leads to the instant an athlete who trained by running through the wasteland defeats the elite athlete who trained in a cutting-edge gym. If you want to reach space, you make your way to a realistic launch pad even if it means leaving your home country. …When adults fight, it comes down to a conflict between *adults with childlike looks in their eyes* as they work to both stay true to the type of race their predecessors established and also to produce shocking results that completely overturn those expectations."

So there was no reason to feel inferior.

There was a reason she had been chosen.

Mitsuari Ayu was no different from the people who shamelessly begged a lottery winner to treat them to something. Except she was not even an old acquaintance; she was someone Shokuhou had never even heard of before.

Shokuhou was not about to let someone like that take everything from her.

The loss of a single possibility had been enough to make Mitsuari rot and she now wanted to be *a child with a mature look in her eyes*, so she would never have been able to withstand the pressure of holding Academy City's #5 ability.

"And I happen to know something else."

Shokuhou continued to challenge the girl even as her stomach was squeezed to the limit.

"I know of an 'older boy' who stuck to his own path without rotting despite being a Level 0. On that day back then when he spoke with his back turned and protecting me, he clearly surpassed me and my all-too-pathetic Level 5 ability. Your actual skill doesn't matter. Coolly calculating out all the numbers is pointless. No matter

how many arguments you prepare, you have no choice but to accept defeat once he walks in from beyond the horizon. I am very familiar with a Level 0 like that"

What was it that kept Mitsuari from shining like that?

Not becoming a Level 5?

That was not enough to deny someone their humanity.

Having her possibilities stolen by the adults?

If that was enough for her to give up, had she truly put in any effort in the first place?

Did that mean any crime of hers could be forgiven?

That was the same as treating all Level 3s and below like criminals.

"You are weak," summed up Shokuhou Misaki. "From the moment you could only use your life as an excuse for committing crimes, you insulted that very life. You didn't notice, you were afraid of noticing, and you went around destroying everything that could make you

notice, but you have also crushed your ability to ever gather respect. Even if you managed to reach the position of Level 5."

"Heh."

At that point, Mitsuari Ayu switched from listening to laughing.

And the crazed expression from before had changed.

"Heh heh heh. Heh heh heh heh. Heh heh heh heh hah hah. Ahh, ahh. It sounds like you met a lovely person, Miss Bee. Was this what you were hoping to say to get me to give up? 'If you had met him, a different path might have opened for you'?"

"…?"

It was a calculated expression.

It was not the expression of a girl going mad with rage after having her entire identity rejected.

There was something more there.

Did the core of Mitsuari Ayu lay elsewhere?

"But that won't work here."

The ant stood next to the bee and that other queen played her final card with a calm smile.

"After all, *I too spoke with Kamijou-kun quite a bit*."

"……
……Eh?"

This time, Shokuhou's mind truly, truly went blank. This blank was larger and deeper than when her own memories had been rejected or when she had learned her own Mental Out powers were the result of being chosen for the adults' convenience.

"I told you, didn't I?"

The smile vanished from Mitsuari's face.

The smile vanished from the face of the girl who had continued to smile even as her very existence and the path she had taken were rejected.

"I'm taking revenge to take back what you stole from me. …How would you feel in my situation? What if someone you didn't even know stole that person you were so proud of."

"…"

"I was there back then too."

She approached Shokuhou whose torso was still restrained. With a smartphone in each hand, she gently grabbed the sides of Shokuhou's head.

The chill of the LCD screens tormented her mind.

And then the decisive words arrived.

"It may be a beautiful past for you, but I was not saved by Kamijou-kun. That is why I can say you stole everything from me. If it wasn't for you, *he would have made it in time*."

She brought her face so close that Shokuhou could not focus her eyes.

And a moment later, Shokuhou felt a strange sensation pass through her mind. It was like invisible wires running through her head had been gathered together and suddenly pulled out from her forehead.

While pressing their foreheads together and placing the smartphones on either side of Shokuhou's head, the other girl spoke without even a hint of a smile.

"This is Mental Stinger. In my case, I set the target with cameras and my fingertips."

"Ah…kh!? But with identical types of power, any interference can be deflected regardless of strength!"

"Only if we both reject it."

With the strange sensation in the center, the outer edges of Shokuhou's vision grew distorted.

Bright colors danced about.

"But what if I accept it all? What if I intentionally open a port and allow an exchange of identically-formatted packets?"

"This…isn't your power."

Shokuhou finally caught on.

"This is an ignition to make me lose control of my Mental Out!?"

"Well done. I can drag you into my head using your own power. Welcome to a life of despair and resignation. It's time you experienced what I did when you stole everything from me."

With those words, all of Shokuhou Misaki's senses far exceeded the threshold of what could be described in terms of the real world.

Part 2

A girl stood alone on the shore of a geothermal power station's circular lake.

Her consciousness had been dragged into someone else's mind. That was what she had been told anyway, but it may have been an image constructed around Mitsuari Ayu's memories, much like a child listening to a picture book before going to sleep.

However, the feel of the place suddenly changed. The massive amount of water turned to bright green melon soda, the dark mountains turned to masses of cream, the thick trees became cookies shaped like playing cards, and even the round concrete structure holding the water was replaced by an overwhelming amount of chocolate.

It looked like a kingdom of sweets.

The bee and the ant were fighting over the sweet nectar that was their memories of this artificial lake. This may have been how “she” pictured this stage.

The oppressively sweet aroma surpassed hunger and stimulated one’s desire to vomit.

Both salt and sugar were necessary, but too much of either was harmful.

Had “her” memories reached that lethal dose?

“I…”

The voice came from behind.

Shokuhou turned around and saw Mitsuari Ayu wearing a Tokiwadai Middle School uniform. She wore a summer uniform despite the season.

"I died here. I stuffed lots and lots of large rocks in my clothes, stood on this concrete shore, and jumped into the lake with my hands together like diving into a pool. And I sank. This happened a mere three days before you thoughtlessly tried to destroy your own memories."

This revelation came suddenly, but Shokuhou did not laugh it off.

Her own memories refused to let her reject this.

On the night when she had met "him" at this lake, she had sprawled out on the ground and pressed her remote against her temple like committing suicide with a handgun. But that scene was now repainted in entirely different colors.

"Wait a second. You mean…the reason he was at that power station so late was…"

She had found it odd.

Meeting him around town by chance was possible.

But District 21 was a long way from District 7 where they lived and most of it was deep in the mountains. Ground Geo was at the peak of a mountain, so he would not simply have been there for a late night walk.

So why had Kamijou Touma been there?

Why had he been able to meet her there?

"He did not make it in time."

"And to lament that fact, he visited the site of the suicide?"

She recalled what Kumokawa Seria had said.

Shokuhou and Kumokawa had both spent time with Kamijou at the same time in the past, but the only connection between the two girls was that common acquaintance. Neither had set foot in the other's private business.

Kumokawa did not know about Shokuhou's incident.

Shokuhou did not know about Kumokawa's incident.

What if?

What if another individual had also spent that time with him and dealt with another incident besides theirs?

"I don't really care about you or anything, but he isn't strong enough to handle someone's death. So don't go off and die. If you do die, I'll give you the proper decorations, so make sure you contact me."

What if those abusive words of Kumokawa's had held an entirely different meaning?

"And when he arrived, he saw another girl in the same Tokiwadai uniform as the one he had not arrived in time for. He didn't know what she was trying to do, but he saw a younger girl who was obviously wallowing in despair. He could not help but call out to her. He did not want a repeat of his previous failure."

Shokuhou remembered the boy she had spent time with when she would occasionally see him around Academy City after that incident at the lake.

She had decided not to peek at his memories.

But what had been her subconscious reason for that decision? Had she not wanted to find any boring reasons or motives behind that small miracle? Had she wanted it to remain pure coincidence?

Kamijou Touma may have been worried about her.

And he may have been comparing her to someone else .

"So why do you think he didn't arrive in time for me?"

"What…?"

"He has no esper power, he has no superhuman strength, and he isn't particularly smart. …But for some reason, his drive has saved so many more people than anyone else. I agree with that. But then, why did that miracle not occur in my case?"

"……You…can't mean…"

"That twisted result would not happen for no reason."

With those words, the kingdom of sweets crumbled.

The entire melon soda lake flickered like a giant screen and it displayed the kind of intersection found anywhere in Academy City.

An intense tremor filled Shokuhou's mind.

She recognized it.

That was the intersection at which she had run into Kamijou Touma like a false start. They had simply collided, barely even exchanged words, and then went on their ways. That initial meeting had seemed like some kind of mistake.

But something must have happened then.

Something an outsider like her would not have noticed , but something those involved could not overlook.

"He accidentally gave me something of his," she muttered in a daze. "There was a cheap cellphone I didn' t recognize mixed in with the things he handed me."

"Yes."

Mitsuari Ayu agreed with a difficult to describe expression.

It looked angry and on the verge of tears yet also relieved at finally conveying the truth.

"That was why he did not arrive in the very, very end. A simple lack of communication caused that perfectly reachable salvation to slip from his fingers."

And then Mitsuari had jumped into the lake.

"I was not the only one suffering due to the Parameter List," she said as if to remind Shokuhou of something that had already ended. "You stood at the center of your own incident, didn't you? Deadlock. Those poor students who held an unreasonable hatred of the Level 5s and believed your AIM Diffusion Field was the reason for their lack of growth."

"…"

"But that was not the true reason. They may have hated the right person, but killing you would not have put their lives back on track. Just like me, they were fruits cut from the branch thanks to that Parameter List the adults had created."

When placed in a true dilemma, people had two options: external destruction or internal destruction.

They could blame their failure on society and their surroundings and begin stabbing or shooting random strangers in the name of revenge.

Or they could place full responsibility for their failure on themselves and desire to be "anywhere else" even if it meant taking their own life.

The attackers of Deadlock had made one decision.

The girl named Mitsuari Ayu had made the other.

"Oh."

In that case, Shokuhou Misaki's bright memories were repainted in entirely different colors.

She recalled their conversation at that artificial lake.

"You're the guy who ran into me at the intersection with toast in his mouth."

"I did not have toast in my mouth. Come to think of it, that means you're the one that brought my phone to Anti-Skill. Thanks for that."

What had Kamijou Touma really thought back then?

When he said that, he had to have known that the disappearance of that cellphone had prevented him from protecting a life.

Whether by coincidence or not, she had been the root cause of his failure to save a girl. So what feelings had filled his heart when he had seen her blindly wishing for her own destruction at the scene of that very suicide?

He should have shouted at her.

She could not have complained if he had punched her.

So why had he hidden it? Why had he hidden it and worried for her instead?

Just how endlessly good-natured was he?

"I wanted to be saved," said Mitsuari.

She directly stated her own desire.

"Taking my own life may sound irresponsible and selfish, but even so, I really did want to be saved."

It was unclear just how serious Mitsuari had been about committing suicide.

Had she truly intended to die or had she wanted to go through the actions so someone would worry about her?

She had waited for her own personal hero, but Kamijou Touma had not shown up.

He had not come.

And so that lonely girl, that life left behind by the world, had felt throwing herself to the depths of that dark water was her only choice.

(Oh.)

Mitsuari had said she was taking revenge on Shokuhou for taking everything from her.

According to her, Shokuhou had twisted her entire life even though they had never met and had avoided

contact because she would have killed Shokuhou the second she saw her.

It all finally clicked in place.

They had shared the same time in the past, but they also had no real connection.

Even so, every last thing had been related to Shokuhou : the Parameter List that had led to her suicide, the cellphone that had been the final trigger, and even that spot next to Kamijou Touma after her suicide.

What if their situations had been reversed?

Shokuhou might have been able to handle the Parameter List issue.

But what about causing him to lose his phone?

What if the girl who had unknowingly given that final shove was then happily walking by that boy's side?

(I probably couldn't have forgiven her. Whatever else may have happened, *that alone* would be unforgivable.)

As Mitsuari was now attacking her as a real threat, her suicide must have ended in failure. And once she had woken, she would have learned everything. That was what had broken her. That was why she had sunken into the deepest darkness of Academy City and gathered enough power to reach the Strobila and Five Over OS.

"Answer me one thing honestly, queen ant."

"Just one, Miss Bee?"

"Why did you wear the Five Over OS? The unit made from Designers' Gel can move on its own, can't it? Then you wouldn't need to swell up to that three hundred kilo body."

"It's easier to see people for who they are when they look down on you, so I intentionally ruined my looks to-…"

"No, not that."

Shokuhou cut her off.

The bee and ant were similar.

She had asked the question after already realizing the answer.

And Mitsuari must have realized that because she spoke in resignation.

"I couldn't exactly let myself be seen like this."

She was covered in the filth of pitch-black hatred.

And the cracks in that hatred allowed a glimpse of the girl who had to have exited back then.

"I said I wanted to help people. I really did say that during that same time you spent with him. And yet…this was the only path available for me. I could never let him know that the Mitsuari Ayu he knew still lives as the utterly-changed ruins of that person."

Shokuhou heard those words.

She confirmed her own thoughts.

She had grasped the core of this girl.

And now she could not abandon her.

Shokuhou Misaki had finally found just one thing that allowed her to think that.

She switched to a new train of thought.

A clear difference appeared in the colors filling her vision.

This changed nothing of what Mitsuari had done. She was a criminal who had immersed herself in Academy City's dark side, altered all sorts of documents, attacked Shokuhou using men disguised as Emergency Aid, used the Strobila and Five Over OS to have her destroy her own memories or personality, and was even now trying to take her life.

But even so, something changed inside Shokuhou.

It may have been the same for that boy. She had been the root cause of that girl's suicide, she had been the one to give the final shove, and she had even defiled the site of that suicide, but he may have found something inside that thoughtless girl.

It only had to be one thing.

Just the one thing that made you not want to kill them.

"Hey, Mitsuari Ayu."

"What?"

"It may be too late and nothing I do now may have any ability to actually change things."

Shokuhou Misaki made an announcement as if challenging the other girl.

"But I'm still going to save you♪ Because I know that's what he would do."

He had saved her like that.

She stood here today because of his decision.

And so no matter how pathetic, ridiculous, or meaningless to others it might be, she refused to reject that salvation.

No matter what.

Part 3

She thought back over the basic assumptions.

Shokuhou Misaki and Mitsuari Ayu stood at a circular artificial lake of a kingdom of sweets where the scene was constructed from cream and melon soda. In truth, the #5's Mental Out power had been used to drag Shokuhou's mind into Mitsuari's mental world.

However…

(Even if you have a method of doing that, I am the Level 5 with the strongest mental powers. No one would want to expose their mind to me.)

Shokuhou powerfully and deeply searched out the pieces she needed to turn this tiny sensation into a victory.

(In that case, she must have a reason to force herself to use this strategy. For example, what is happening to my body right now? If she had preprogrammed the Five Over OS, it could be dragging my body away, implanting something inside it, or whatever she wanted.)

"Hee hee. *I can read all of that.*"

Shokuhou frantically turned around and saw all of her thoughts written out in melted chocolate ink on the cream mountains.

"And the work is already done. Even if you begin fighting now, there is no way to turn it around."

"Is that so?"

As soon as she spoke, her words appeared on the sweet mountains.

Her mouth and the writing had the bizarre synchronization of movie subtitles.

"If you really had that much time, you wouldn't have needed to reveal everything about your embarrassing past to me. It was valuable to me, but it was meaningless to you. In that case, I can only imagine you were stalling for time. The situation is not progressing as smoothly as you would like."

"But that changes nothing."

"I will make sure it does."

(What is she trying to do with the Five Over OS? Kill me while I don't have the ability to defend myself? No, then she could leave it to that tentacle that could crush a car. My ability doesn't work on machines, so Mental Out

wouldn't be a problem if she left it to a program. More importantly, I can't even sense the pain while my mind and body are separated. This situation doesn't fit with her supposed intent to take revenge by killing me.)

Even though her thoughts were leaking out, she kept thinking as quickly as she could.

The mountains were already filled with chocolate ink writing and it began to fill the terribly bright night sky that had candy sprinkled through it.

(So she must be after something beyond that.)

She was being buried by her own thoughts, but she did not waver.

She stared out at Mitsuari's world.

(She must have in mind a crueler punishment than merely killing me. But what is it? How is she planning to use the Five Over OS to bring an end to that awful past that began with the Parameter List and ended with me being saved instead of her?)

"You won't find the answer."

A voice disturbed her thoughts.

But it led Shokuhou to realize something: that voice was clearly unnecessary. Her thoughts were getting nowhere fast, so not giving her any new information would be the best option as her enemy.

And yet Mitsuari spoke those unneeded words.

"Just like my words and thoughts are set to be exposed in chocolate ink as time goes on, are you not able to lie inside your own mind?"

"That's right. But either way, you won't make it in time. It is already here."

"It's already here? Not just on its way?"

"And that is why you did not make it in time."

She used the past tense again.

A moment later, a great shock ran through that mental world. The cream and chocolate kingdom of sweets melted away as if intense sunlight washed over it.

(This isn't good. She's throwing away the mental cage herself. That means she has no reason to keep it around and she has already put my body in checkmate back in the real world!)

"I want to make that past mine and mine alone."

Mitsuari Ayu's expression remained unchanged even as she too was swallowed up by the torrent.

"That is why your memories are not needed. And if I can't alter them with the Five Over OS, I have to bring in a higher-level machine."

"You don't mean…"

The Five Over OS was a devilish device that rewrote the scenery surrounding the target and used that twisted information to indirectly influence their memories and mental state.

If there was a truly superior machine, it would have to be…

"It can't be!"

Part 4

It resembled a bee or a wasp.

However, this was not a honeybee or giant hornet that created a hive and lived as a group. This was a lone-wolf species.

It was a scorpion wasp.

Like a crane fly, it had six oddly long legs and a slender abdomen. Its most notable feature was the stinger which was formed by a delicate tube that extended more than three times the length of its body. Normally, that stinger was used to pierce into the larvae eating into a tree and then lay its eggs inside them.

This weapon was designed after that bizarre parasitic wasp, its main body was four meters long, and its thin wings were twice that length when extended. Its abdomen was a translucent device filled with a sticky fluid. If anyone had seen it, they might have compared it to a coffin because it was clearly meant to contain a human body.

This was the Five Over Modelcase Mental Out.

It used pure industrial technology to completely reproduce the phenomena of a Level 5's powers and, unlike the OS, it used the same basic theory as the Level 5's powers. On top of that, it was meant to exceed the original's output.

This was the final trump card the ant had hidden away to challenge the bee.

Part 5

A giant form stood at the center of the world as everything melted together and formed a marble pattern.

It was a bizarrely long and narrow weapon that looked like a crane fly given the details of a wasp.

It was likely due to that weapon that Shokuhou and Mitsuari had been able to "compare answers" in that world of no lies.

"Five Over…?" muttered a dazed Shokuhou Misaki. "I 'd heard one modelled after that foolish #3 had been mass-produced, but I didn't know there was one for me. In fact, I thought even the researchers couldn't agree how exactly Mental Out works."

"Hee hee. To be honest, this thing breaks the rules. I doubt the higher ups would have agreed to build it under normal circumstances."

"?"

"After all, *it doesn't contain anything to reproduce an esper's powers using industrial technology.* It doesn't fit the definition of a Five Over."

Shokuhou did not understand.

That would mean it was nothing more than a flying powered suit shaped like an insect.

But she rejected that idea.

"No, nothing that lacking in ability would show up after all this."

"Very true. To correct what you said earlier, I believe they understood the general process Mental Out uses, but the exact distribution was a mystery. Even with a refrigerator full of ingredients, you can't reproduce the flavor of a restaurant's dishes without the recipe. This was the same."

Mitsuari's voice filled the melting world.

"That is why I will put you inside the machine."

"…"

"I know it's getting the priorities hopelessly reversed, but it's the only correct answer. That Five Over is crammed full of eight thousand output devices. By placing you inside and having you activate your powers, it can monitor exactly which devices to use and how. By taking sample data from the real Level 5 just once, we should be able to mass-produce it without end."

For just an instant, Shokuhou imagined a world where Mental Out could be bought at any store just like a cellphone.

"You're completely insane."

"Ha ha! So you're allowed to have it, but no one else is ? No one's going to listen to you if you say that."

Mitsuari's words gave no thought to the future.

She was not thinking about what would happen to the world even three days later.

"And it's a little late to be shocked by this. This was tested quite a long time ago."

"What?"

"Let's talk about the past again. Remember Deadlock, that group of students who attacked you for the wrong reason, even if their anger was justified? Do you remember one peculiar element of their Queen Diver weapon systems? That's right. The helmets blocked your mental attacks by putting a program in control once their brainwaves shifted."

"Are you saying they did more than that? Did those thoroughly scan the brain structure of the people I was controlling and send a report back to someone?"

"In the end, that information failed to produce a working Five Over. That said, I don't know if it was a simple technical issue or if it was because the adults leading the project were *blown to pieces in a highly unusual accidental explosion.*"

Mitsuari's tone was entirely unconcerned.

Based on that, Shokuhou decided those “adults” were not anyone Mitsuari had particularly known and the girl had likely not been involved in the supposed accident.

“And the people leftover decided they would never get anywhere even with data from tens of thousands of victims. They realized they would never create a true Five Over without data from the culprit herself. That meant they needed a system to force your power out of you using electrodes or something like that.”

The present was built on the past, but every single thing was intertwined with “those days”. It felt like the past itself was a giant arm dragging Shokuhou away.

“I will complete your Five Over.”

Was that Mitsuari Ayu’s revenge?

Would she fill the world with Mental Out to reduce Shokuhou Misaki’s value to nothing?

No.

Shokuhou knew that was not it.

The core of that girl's heart was not her comparison with Shokuhou. That core was somewhere else.

"I have no future and I don't care who is there now. But…in the past…in those days, I played the leading role . I will take that back. You are not needed in my memories of him, so I will erase you. I will use your own Mental Out to smash your memories to pieces."

Who exactly was she directing her revenge toward?

Shokuhou Misaki? That boy? Academy City? The entire world?

"Those days should be mine and mine alone. You are not wanted there."

All of a sudden, Mitsuari was nowhere to be seen.

That melting and crumbling landscape was her mental world, so she might have melted into it.

Shokuhou had lost track of her target.

The already hard-to-bear saccharine smell mixed together even further.

Only Mitsuari's voice filled that marble-patterned world.

"This is already over. The Five Over simply has to place you inside while you can't even touch your own body. Once the electrodes are attached across your body and your powers are forcibly drawn out, this will truly be over. You can drown in this melting world until then."

"Do you really think I'll let you do that?"

"There's nothing you can do. Your mind is split from your body and trapped in my head, so you can't move your body back in reality. You can't even blink. Meanwhile, both the Outsider and Five Over are programmed to move on their own. And don't forget you are trapped by the OS's tentacle, so you couldn't do anything even if you could move. It is only a matter of time before you are automatically brought inside the Five Over."

Shokuhou listened to that and thought on that hopeless checkmate.

However, her next words contradicted that.

"*Are you sure?*"

A tremendous shock ran through the sweet marble-patterned world.

This was blatantly different from the previous smooth flow of melting.

This strange scenery was Mitsuari's mental world, so any change here signified a change in her.

"What?"

"I would suggest returning us as soon as you can" said Shokuhou in a mocking tone. "I didn't have enough spare ability to hold back, so could have killed you if you were unlucky."

"Kssshhh!? What is – kshhhh! – going on here? What did you-…?"

"What do you think?"

"How did you *attack my body in the outside world*!?"

"How do you think?"

Part 6

"Ghah!!"

As if forcibly dragged out by her body's warning signals, Mitsuari Ayu got up on the shore of the artificial lake.

Something was wrong with her organs. They were convulsing and she could not breathe properly.

To find the source of the oddity, she looked down to her stomach.

It was only then that she realized what was happening .

"O…S?"

A giant yellowish-white octopus tentacle had sunk into her stomach as if performing a body blow.

"Agh!? Why…Why have I lost control of the Five Over OS?"

She just barely suppressed the rising urge to vomit and slowly looked up.

There she saw the #5 who had been constricted so tightly she should have been spewing her organs from her mouth. However, the girl had escaped the grasp of that giant tentacle.

In fact, the Outsider's giant form had changed position to protect her instead.

"You…took control of it? But…that's impossible. Your Mental Out is supposed to be useless against pure technology!!"

"That's right♪"

Shokuhou spun a television remote around in her hand.

"So here's a question. You used a variety of methods to locate the bodyguards I had hidden around and I ordered them to leave so those unrelated espers wouldn't die. But where exactly did I send all those powerful espers?"

"You can't mean…"

"When I thought about it, it didn't make sense."

The #5 lady smiled with her intense exhaustion visible on her face.

"I get why my Five Over couldn't be mass-produced. After all, it was an incomplete product that lacked its core Mental Out ability, so it had yet to prove itself worthy of mass-production. …But what about the Five Over OS? Its effectiveness has been proven and it has a detailed blueprint, so why hasn't it been prepared for military use?"

In other words…

"The Five Over OS is a prototype with plenty of unresolved problems remaining. For example, it can't perfectly overwrite the scenery from just your viewpoint. After all, you're using the magnetically-controlled monitor to overwrite an entire power station…no, to overwrite the entire landscape visible from here in real time. To pull that off without anything feeling out of place, you need to monitor the entire target area from multiple angles to check for abnormalities."

Mitsuari looked down at her own smartphone.

"Are you saying you went after that? Did you locate the people providing the Five Over OS's different ' viewpoints', attack them, and steal their lenses!?"

"Correct" Shokuhou laughed. "So. What if we took over all of the lenses forming that ultra-wide range network that even crosses into other districts? What if we used those lenses to provide malicious feedback? Could that maybe allow us to take control of your precious toy like tugging on a marionette's strings?"

"…"

"Besides, we are two sides of the same coin. Just like me, you should be ridiculously strong against people's minds but weak against pure machines. You weren't giving detailed commands to the Five Over OS, were you ? Once the data being sent in from around the area was gathered together, you would give general instructions with small gestures and the machine would take care of the rest. …In that case, can someone so *terrible with machines* recover from this even if you know what's going on?"

"You couldn't possibly pull that off. I have thirty-nine different 'viewpoints' that perfectly blend into the city as

normal people. Do you seriously expect me to believe you instantly located, attacked, and defeated them all to take control of the OS without me noticing?"

"Think what you want," said Shokuhou with an air of importance. "But it's because we can do that sort of thing that we're called Tokiwadai Middle School's largest clique"

Part 7

A girl with black twintails ran through the trees at tremendous speed. She ignored the winding mountain road and dashed along the steep slope of that deep forest with the momentum of a racecar.

"Target incapacitated. Please give me the next target."

In a distant room, a girl with bobbed hair traced her index finger along a map with her eyes closed.

"Next. District 7, exit A2 of Western Mountain Station. The target is a man in a knit hat sitting on a bench."

A girl with voluminous ringlet curls quietly stood behind a man in a knit hat who blended into the city while messing with a smartphone.

"Understood. I will now incapacitate him."

It no longer mattered to the girls whether they were being controlled.

They did not care if this would only help the one who stood in the center.

They may not have been powerful enough to be called Academy City's #5 or #3.

They may not have been powerful enough to be called an ace or a queen.

But one could not forget that they were young ladies of Tokiwadai Middle School.

That position alone meant they played more than minor roles.

Every single one of them did.

While a beehive had a queen, it was mostly run by the soldier bees who flew around the surrounding area.

Part 8

"Now," said Shokuhou. "I think I'll take this toy of yours♪"

The entire landscape changed. Like switching off a television, it transformed into the dreary gray of the artificial lake at night. This scene matched Shokuhou's memories perfectly.

And the tentacles of the giant octopus device rushed toward Mitsuari.

"Now, how about we enjoy this!?"

"…!! Five Over!!"

As soon as Mitsuari Ayu shouted out, the true Five Over that resembled a scorpion wasp collided with the imitation OS.

The two girls did not follow the weapons with their eyes.

They both pointed their television remote or smartphone lens toward each other's faces.

They had nothing left to trick each other with.

No further truth remained hidden.

(When it comes down to pure power, I should have the advantage with my upwards compatibility. But her inferiority complex should give her the ability to know that all too well, so she won't choose to fight that way!)

With a dull sound of impact, the scorpion wasp Five Over slammed into the octopus Outsider. As it did, the long, thick tube that resembled a scorpion wasp's ovipositor snapped like a whip and forcefully struck Mitsuari's back.

The impact knocked the breath from her and launched her forward.

As she flew through the air, she turned a look of clear hostility toward Shokuhou.

(She's going for a physical battle instead of a psychological one!?)

Deadlock had once cornered her in the same way.

To kill her before she could control them, they had approached too quickly for her to use her remote. They had even taken the concept to its extreme with their Queen Diver equipment.

Mitsuari tightly clutched her smartphone and swung her fist toward Shokuhou's face.

The girl shot toward her.

"You…!?"

Shokuhou cried out while forcibly blocking the fist with both her arms.

She once more tried to thrust her remote toward the girl's head, but the girl grabbed her arm at the wrist and shoved it outward.

And now that she was unguarded, the girl swung her smartphone-holding fist at her face.

Pain could leave one in a dazed state.

A stun grenade was known as a non-lethal weapon that blinded people with a flash of light and loud noise, but that explanation was not quite sufficient. By assaulting people with more information than they could handle, they were left in a daze for a few seconds to a few dozen seconds. A fist to the face could produce a similar phenomenon.

And Shokuhou had not lived a life that left her accustomed to pain.

The gap between Level 3 and Level 5 was obvious, but who could say what would happen if the Level 3 power was used against the Level 5 in the short "gap" this created.

But…

(If you think this remote is my only weapon, you're sorely mistaken!)

"Outsider!!"

Rather than the machine, she was speaking to the girls of her clique who had stolen all of the nearly forty smartphones which were sending massive amounts of data on the changes to the landscape.

A moment later, a giant hieroglyphic-like eyeball attached to Shokuhou's body. This was the same method Mitsuari had used. One of the sources of fear that people of all cultures and regions shared was the face of a beauty swinging her hair around in rage. This was an effect extracted from that and it was designed to stir up people's emotions as much as possible.

Once Mitsuari fell for this and her movements dulled, Shokuhou could use her remote.

However, Shokuhou saw the other girl hold up the smartphone in her palm to cover her eyes.

Instead of using her own eyes, she viewed the scene through the camera after running it through some kind of filter.

"Ah."

Shokuhou recalled that Mitsuari had mentioned the story of Medusa when using this tactic.

In that story, hadn't a shield polished into a mirror been used to avoid her gaze?

"You will…"

Mitsuari's other hand grabbed Shokuhou's honey-blonde hair.

She tugged downwards to point Shokuhou's head toward her own clothes.

"You will be the one to experience this digital petrification!!"

"Oh, no…"

Shokuhou's entire body stiffened.

Soon, the fist holding the smartphone flew toward her.

It jabbed into her cheek, shook her head, and briefly blanked out her thoughts with the sudden pain and the vibration of her inner ear.

(Not good.)

Mitsuari pointed the smartphone lens toward her.

A disturbing number of blood vessels were swelling out on the girl's small face. Most likely, she had failed to completely escape the origin of fear used by the OS.

She moved her arms and legs as if they were being eaten into and as if she were breaking free from chains.

She was tenacious.

She had no future and her present contained nothing but tragedy, but the mistaken yet utterly pure heart at the core of her being wished to have the past all to herself .

And for this brief moment, that surpassed all else.

Her fingertips moved across the smartphone and Shokuhou's vision instantly fell into darkness.

Part 9

Where was she and what had happened?

For a while, Shokuhou Misaki did not understand anything.

Her cognitive ability had dropped considerably like when half asleep. She could not think logically and even her five senses and sensation of gravity were blurred. Everything around her wavered and she had lost any sense of temperature.

After several seconds, her mind rapidly cleared. It was then that she realized the ambiguous information coming from her five senses was not mistaken after all.

She was stuffed inside the transparent coffin that formed the abdomen of the giant scorpion wasp combat machine called the Five Over Modelcase Mental Out.

Her vision was blurred and her sense of gravity and temperature were unclear because of the pale red fluid filling the coffin.

The coffin was opened on the wasp's back and Shokuhou found she had no trouble breathing despite being completely immersed in the sticky fluid.

She heard a bubbling sound and Mitsuari's wavering voice came from beyond the strange fluid's surface.

"You really are amazing."

There was no hint of praise in her voice.

"After all that preparation and even some coincidences in my favor, I was only able to knock you unconscious. And you woke up only three seconds later. If you had recovered any sooner, I would have had to grab your hair and hit you again."

"…"

"But it's already over."

With a bubbling sound, Mitsuari's hands sank into the red fluid.

They extended toward various parts of Shokuhou's body. They pulled up her coat and even reached below her skirt, but the #5 no longer had the strength to move.

The reason why was simple.

"Damn, my fingertips are tingling. I get why the conducting fluid needs a slight anesthetic effect, but why can it get through my suit?"

Mitsuari was attaching wired medical electrodes to Shokuhou.

Submerging her in the conducting fluid prevented her body and mind from resisting and the electrodes would give the specific commands to draw out her power.

If that alone was how the machine was meant to artificially produce Mental Out, it could somewhat be called a success.

But Mitsuari had other intentions.

She would monitor exactly how Shokuhou used the eight thousand output devices to obtain the detailed recipe for controlling someone's mind. By sending that recipe back into the machine, she would have reproduced the #5's power with purely industrial technology.

And that stolen power would be used to completely erase Shokuhou's memories with Kamijou Touma.

Her own power would crush her very core.

"Done."

Finally, Mitsuari removed her hands from the sticky red fluid.

That satisfied word was enough for Shokuhou to gradually realize what was happening to her.

"Now, it's time to end this ridiculous revenge. You will lose everything, have every last memory altered, and have nothing left to prove those days ever existed. The only memories will remain in my heart. Jewel boxes are made to be closed, after all."

"…"

She was right.

Shokuhou Misaki had lost.

And that loss meant her only option was to lose everything and live an empty life without even knowing what she had lost.

Yes.

If she and Mitsuari were the only two in this world, that is.

"Honestly, it's unbelievable."

She was unsure if her voice was actually reaching Mitsuari beyond the surface of that fluid, but the other girl may have been able to read something from her expression and the movements of her lips.

"It's always at times just like this. Everyone can tell it's checkmate and even the person in question has accepted their defeat, but then someone shows up and refuses to accept that defeat."

"What…are you talking about?"

"You can't tell?"

The girl in the fluid could not move her arms or legs, but something floated up from her chest. It was a cheap silver emergency whistle attached to a thin ribbon.

Even if she could bring it to her mouth, it would produce no sound inside this fluid.

And even if it did, it would not reach anyone.

She knew that, but she still placed her small lips on that link to her past.

She remembered his words.

"Use it if you're in trouble. It might give me more chances to save you."

Even as a tingling pain reached the tip of her tongue, she smiled inside that coffin.

"Maybe you wouldn't recognize this since he didn't make it in time for you. At times just like this, when a girl is facing her ruin and has forgotten to even cry, someone will always come rushing in for them."

Mitsuari's face distorted so much it was amazing it did not make any noise.

"No help is coming."

"Yes, it is"

"Nothing has suggested that! He has no information to lead him here!! Besides, he has completely lost his memories beyond anything our powers can do, so he doesn't know who Mitsuari Ayu or Shokuhou Misaki are . He doesn't remember us! He can't even picture our faces!! So…!!!!!"

"Nevertheless, he'll come," said Shokuhou. "It has nothing to do with whether he knows the person or not. It doesn't matter if he has anything to gain and he doesn't have to follow a proper course of foreshadowed hints."

He did not have extraordinary athletic ability.

He did not have the intellect or skill of a superhuman genius.

He did not have the fortune needed to run a nation.

He did not have the deductive ability to resolve any incident from his easy chair.

He did not have the beauty to ruin a country with a smile.

He did not have the political power to change history with a snap of his fingers.

He did not have the unbelievable power of a Level 5.

But…

Nevertheless…

"He is my hero."

Shokuhou looked straight up at the wavering face beyond the surface.

She was certain it was more than just the fluid and the anesthesia causing that face to waver.

"I don't care how others see him. He can be someone else's hero too. The authenticity of his righteousness doesn't matter. But none of that changes his ability to be my personal hero. …So he will come. Even if he has forgotten everything and even if someone else is smiling by his side, *just this once, it's my turn*"

"He won't come," muttered Mitsuari.

A moment later, two arms burst into the sticky red liquid with an explosion of bubbles.

"He won't come. He won't show up like that! After all …he didn't reach me. He didn't catch up to me. He didn' t make it in time for me!! Being our hero doesn't make him almighty. If the conditions aren't just right, he won't show up. Because you got in his way, my hero failed to show up!!"

The two slender hands wrapped around Shokuhou's neck.

They squeezed with unbelievable strength.

"Gah…gh…!?"

She tried to stop Shokuhou's breathing even if it meant ruining her entire plan.

She wanted her to feel the same pain she had felt as she sank into that dark water while still waiting for him to arrive.

She strangled the other girl with a splendid look on her face.

The thin ribbon around Shokuhou's neck broke and the physical link to her past left her mouth.

That cheap silver whistle symbolized her bond with that boy and it floated up and away through the fluid.

"You won't be saved! No help is coming! It won't arrive in time!! Just like with me. Just like I lost everything. The only path left for you is to be destroyed as you long for someone who will never arrive!!"

"Then…"

With the blood vessels of her neck constricted and heat pressing down on her entire head, Shokuhou forced out what barely counted as a voice.

And she said it.

"Who…is…that…?"

"……
……
……"

The pressure on her neck vanished.

With her hands still plunged inside the red fluid, Mitsuari turned her head to look at something.

No.

At some*one*.

"It can't be."

"Why not?"

"Because this is District 21. It's so far from District 7 and no one would come to an unmanned power station deep in the mountains while out on a walk!"

"That's what I did."

"Both of us have vanished from his memory, he would never think to come save you, and he shouldn't have any way of learning about this or even imagining it could be happening!!"

"He doesn't have to start from the beginning. It isn't uncommon for him to show up midway to save someone ."

"He didn't make it in time for me. He didn't arrive because he lost his only hint."

"But…"

"But…"

"There's more to him than just that."

"But why… Why did he make it this tiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiime!?"

A tremendous sound burst out and Shokuhou clearly saw the scenery distort around Mitsuari.

Their powers technically manipulated people's minds by controlling the moisture in their brains. The changes they caused were normally microscopic and they could

not cause any physical phenomena visible with the naked eye.

But she overturned that assumption with her anger.

The actual phenomenon may have been similar to freeze-drying. In that process, the pressure was increased by compressing the moisture in the air while the water molecules inside the target were removed to fill the object with microscopic holes like a dried sponge. Here, it created a demonic territory that would cause any living creature to crumble like dried paper mache and that territory burst out from Mitsuari in every direction.

The mechanically-controlled monitor dust turned white while producing the sound of bursting sparks and that color change swallowed up the entire landscape.

Shokuhou was only saved because of the special fluid of the Five Over, but what about the person outside?

"…"

She slowly tilted her head and managed to get a view outside the transparent coffin.

Her wavering vision saw a certain boy with an arm in a cast hanging from his shoulder in a sling. Mitsuari's demonic territory approached him. The magnetically-controlled monitor dust turned pure white and that color began to envelop him.

What he did in response was simple.

He swung that arm to the side.

And it came in contact with that demonic territory.

The cast shattered, his right hand was exposed, and the hopeless attack was eliminated in an instant.

That was the sign that the pointy-haired boy named Kamijou Touma was back.

Most likely, he knew nothing.

He did not know what was happening here, who the people involved were, or what feelings had led to it all.

"Use it if you're in trouble. It might give me more chances to save you."

He would not even remember that tiny promise he had made when giving her the cheap silver whistle. Nor would he remember the person who had relied so heavily on that tiny promise.

Nevertheless, he would save her.

He would never overlook a girl suffering before his eyes.

"…"

Shokuhou saw Mitsuari's lips mouth the word "why".

She was the girl he had not arrived for. This was the scene she had waited so very, very long to see. And Shokuhou felt like she really had heard what that girl said when she saw that scene from the viewpoint of the enemy.

(I have been saved enough.)

That was Shokuhou's honest thought in that moment.

And so…

"This is your homework."

She mercilessly spoke as if giving a push to the trembling back of that other girl.

"Go get his help. Get enough of his help that you'll actually accept it this time."

A moment later, there was a clash.

Epilogue: A Certain Exit — No.05_Closed(and_Next_Door).

“I see. So, Touma, you took off your cast even though you’re not a doctor and that’s why you’re in so much pain now? It sounds to me like it was entirely your own fault.”

“Why are you being so cold!?”

“Hey, don’t give him any attention. He’s the type that will grow addicted to the kindness people show him when he has a cold. We need to correct his behavior before it becomes a habit. Simply put, ignore him.”

“You’re being downright coldhearted, Othinus!”

“I don’t have to hold back anymore, right? I can go ahead and bite him, right?”

“I hope you aren’t looking down on me because I’m only fifteen centimeters tall now. Do you want me to show you what happens if I jab an arm or leg into your eye or ear?”

“Wait! Stop! Especially you, Othinus! That would be actual torture!!”

After the storm passed, Kamijou Touma escaped to the hospital courtyard while trembling like a weary old man. At the end of November, the courtyard was plenty cold even in the sun, but it still seemed to function as a place of healing. He spotted some other people here and there.

As he sat on a bench and let out a heavy sigh, someone gently sat next to him.

"It's been a while"

"…?"

Kamijou frowned when a girl with waist-length honey-blonde hair spoke to him. For one thing, she was really close. Far too close. He hesitantly moved away while asking a question.

"*Um, who are you?*"

"Ah ha ha. Don't worry. That's the normal response. You always forget me right away."

"Hm? That's the same Tokiwadai uniform Misaka wears. Wait, are you really in middle school???"

"Heh hehn. You can make a thorough inspection if you want. I'm quite proud of what I've grown here."

For some reason the girl responded to his impolite gaze by brushing her hair from her shoulder and meaninglessly puffing out her chest. He could not figure out what she was trying to do.

However…

"Hmm, have we met somewhere before?"

"…"

"Well, you might not want me to mention it, but…is this the smell of your hair? That honey scent seems somehow familiar."

"Ah ha ha. …Sigh. That's just not fair. There shouldn't be any chance left, but that's going to give me some hope ."

"What?"

"Just talking to myself. Someone you know may use the same perfume or shampoo."

"Is that it?"

Kamijou tilted his head, but the girl moved onto the next topic.

"Do you have anything to ask about Mitsuari Ayu?"

"Mitsuari? Oh, that girl from yesterday. But why do you know about that?"

"Sigh. You remember the enemy but not the one you saved. That really is a strange memory ability."

The girl sounded exasperated.

"The Five Over and Outsider prototypes were completely destroyed and I was just about to *clean up* the design data. That means there's no chance of Mental Out being mass-produced and spread around the world, so don't worry"

"Mental Out? Oh, right, right. That person was involved in this! Huh? But what kind of person were they again?"

"It's fine if you don't know. As for Mitsuari Ayu herself, she was officially sent to juvenile hall for a

juvenile crime, but who knows what really happened. However, I do know she ignored her organization's plans, went on a personal rampage, and gathered power by *helping herself* to items from a variety of different positions, so it's possible a number of different assassins will be sent after her. We probably need to watch over her for protection more than making sure she doesn't head back to the dark side. But leave all that to me. You don't need to worry about it."

"Is that so?" muttered Kamijou.

The girl seemed to scoot even closer and looked a little irritated at how little he reacted.

"By the way."

"What?"

"Why did you suddenly show up at that artificial lake last night?"

"Oh, that."

He looked up at the blue expanse of the sky overhead.

"*An upperclassman* told me that 'it's her birthday today, so how about setting a flower out for her'. I didn't know what she meant, so I thought I would visit that mountaintop to find out."

"I see."

A somehow kind look entered the girl's eyes.

It was a strange look much like someone giving applause even after the magician revealed how the trick worked.

"So who are you anyway?"

"You'll just forget, so it's hard to work up the motivation to name myself. Instead…"

Just as he heard that last word, her face suddenly moved in close and he felt the soft sensation of her lips on his forehead.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

"Ah ha ha. Don't worry. You'll forget all about it soon enough."

The girl with honey-blonde hair gave a teasing yet somehow sad smile as she stood from the bench.

She said one last thing without turning back.

“I am a girl you once saved. Feel free to think of me like that”

There was actually a short continuation to the past shared by Shokuhou Misaki and Kamijou Touma.

The student group called Deadlock had attacked them with their Queen Divers that used countless wheels and jet engines to produce overwhelming speed. They had offered to spare Kamijou if he abandoned Shokuhou and he had obviously insisted on fighting to protect the girl. However, he had been unable to end it all unharmed.

Shokuhou had assisted using her remotes.

She had successfully reduced the number of targets surrounding them by having them take each other out or twisting their understanding so they charged in the wrong direction.

But it had not been enough.

Kamijou Touma had used his own body to forcibly hold back those she had failed to intercept.

Shokuhou still remembered the awful rusty smell that had filled her nose.

Once it had all ended and an ambulance's siren rang through the night, the familiar boy's arms and legs had been convulsing in a disturbing way she had never seen before.

"Stand back! Damn, he's gone into shock. Just leave this to us!!"

The EMT's tense voice had suggested this was a shocking sight even to those people who were used to scenes of bloodshed.

"The sharp fragments of a ruptured fuel tank tore into his stomach. You have to do something about that at least!"

"I know! But we can't do anything right now. He's convulsing from the shock, so any attempt at treatment would only open the wound further!"

"But he won't make it to the hospital! Can't you do something with your anesthetic ability!?"

"He went into shock because of the drop in blood pressure. Using an anesthetic would only lower it further and that could easily kill him! We can't do something that dangerous!!"

"…"

The EMT had used his radio to contact the hospital, but that had seemed to be bad news as well. They had been told to use a different hospital.

They were not going to make it and he was going to die.

Shokuhou had clenched her teeth and made a suggestion.

"If there was a way to eliminate his pain without using anesthetic, could you give him emergency treatment here ?"

"What are you-…?"

"I have Mental Out, a mental power ranked at Level 5. I can cut off his sense of pain using that. That should have the same effect as anesthetic without lowering his blood pressure any further."

The EMT had seemed hesitant.

That would be taking a gamble with a patient's life using a makeshift method not in any manual. And it could easily end up dirtying the hands of a normal person and of a child. Many different problems may have spiraled through his head.

But after he simply could not come up with an answer, he had slammed the radio mic onto the hook and spoke.

"If it has a chance of working, then let's do it."

There was one fact Shokuhou had not told the EMT back then.

Her power controlled people's minds by manipulating the moisture in their brain. She had no guarantee her power would work properly when his blood pressure had dropped so radically and the moisture in his brain was out of balance.

Later, a certain doctor had told her the following:

"This isn't really damage to his memories. It's more like damage to the pathways that call in the memories. Even if the boy can talk about you, he won't be able to remember you. If you think of the brain as storing people 's faces and names, you could say your section alone was physically crushed. I don't think there is anything you can do even with your powers."

But when she had done it, Shokuhou had not considered anything like that.

She had simply been worried about whether she could save his life or not.

She had realized nothing could outweigh that and so she had immediately acted.

"If…"

Somewhere and sometime, she had spoken these words.

Since he would always forget again and again, the specific ordering of events may not have mattered.

"If someday you do manage to overturn the expectations created by the adults and you remember me …"

The timeline did not matter.

It may have been the past and it may have been the future.

At any rate, Shokuhou Misaki said these words.

"Then let's have an important talk. A very, very sweet, kind, and important talk."

She knew it could never be.

She knew she was simply dragging out an issue that had ended long ago.

But…

Even so…

In the farthest reaches of the world closest to him, that girl continued to wait all alone for a tiny miracle.

A golden retriever did not particularly enjoy taking walks at night.

The darkness produced idle thoughts and being near his workplace was the ideal environment for him to relax . Unlike the other Kiharas, he made no distinction between work and play but was not much of a workaholic either.

He was currently on his way to District 15 which was well known for entertainment.

It may have looked like the woman in a cheap suit and lab coat was walking her dog without a leash, but their relationship was nearly the opposite of that.

“Sensei, whenever you are ready.”

“Right.”

They stopped in front a high-rise building covered in glass. It was a giant aquarium called the Celestaquarium.

However, it was less a place to observe aquatic life out of academic interest and more a place to build up the proper mood for young couples.

The golden retriever had a job to do here.

And of course, it was a job as a Kihara.

"Noukan-sensei."

He turned toward the voice and found Kihara Yuiitsu with her heels politely pressed together, her hands clasped near her navel, and her head lowered to the proper angle all like a well-trained maid. She spoke in a dignified voice as if seeing the large dog off to the battlefield.

"Good luck."

"Right. …You wait somewhere away from here. I have a feeling this will get rough."

The golden retriever parted ways with the young woman and snuck inside the building on his own. The electronic locks and alarms he came across were of no use against him.

With all the lights out, the aquarium felt creepier than a hospital at night.

He boarded an elevator located where no normal visitor would ever find it, stood on his hind legs, and pressed a button with his front paw.

When expecting an indoor battle, one would normally never use the elevator. After all, you could be locked inside it or it could be dropped from the top floor. The fact that he ignored those possibilities suggested the golden retriever had done "something" to this building.

With a soft electronic tone, the elevator doors opened.

This was the top floor.

A blue world filled the entire space. In addition to a giant donut-shaped water tank, glass covered the entire ceiling and a massive amount of seawater covered everything. The lights of the city and the moonlight collided within the water and created spectacular artwork out of that light. This was a guaranteed date spot that lowly fashion magazines said was more effective than aphrodisiacs.

"I hope you will excuse me for this late night visit."

The golden retriever walked into the center of that floor.

He was quite large for a dog, but he looked tiny compared to the aquatic life. The creature facing him beyond the thick reinforced glass was a giant killer whale measuring over five meters long.

This was the king of the ocean who had no natural enemies.

The golden retriever once more spoke to that white and black creature playing in the water.

“Do you think you can fool me by acting like an animal? Someone calling himself a Kihara has appeared to you. That alone should tell you how serious the situation is.”

After a few seconds, the creature finally looked the dog in the eye.

As the fierce king of the ocean’s mouth moved, the aquarium speakers produced the refined voice of a middle-aged man.

"Oh, dear. I thought she would be somewhat useful, but has she been captured already?"

This was a conversation between a large dog and a killer whale.

That may have sounded like something from a children's book, but what lurked between them was far different.

This was the dark side of the city.

They were surrounded by an all too dangerous stench that symbolized that fact.

"How many sacrifices did it take to reach your current brain?" asked the golden retriever who bore the title of Kihara.

"Quite a few. The elephant and whale didn't work. The capacity of their brains far exceeds that of a human's, but they had difficulty accepting me. On the other hand, a gorilla or chimpanzee was too boring. They have intelligence, but the structure seemed more inferior than anything. However, I settled on a killer whale both for

those anatomical reasons and because of my personal preferences. Not having to worry about wearing any clothes really does make you inhuman, doesn't it?"

The overwhelming difference between humans and other animals was their brain structure.

That was something even children could sense despite having no understanding of anatomy or zoology. But perhaps that was because they could not think of any other way humans were superior to other animals.

But didn't it seem odd?

What about the human brain was superior to others? From a purely anatomical perspective, an elephant's brain was overwhelmingly larger than a human's. Their bodies were larger too, so that was hardly surprising. Even if all the wrinkles in a human's brain were stretched out to expand it, it could not match the elephant's.

Nevertheless, the human intellect far surpassed an elephant's.

No other animal had the intelligence or emotions of humans. Why was that? It was because those other animals lacked “something” that humans had.

So what if that insufficiency was filled?

More specifically, what if a human brain was broken apart, the minimum number of parts to make a human a human was attached to an animal’s brain, and an exchange of electrical signals was established?

As previously stated, plenty of animals had brains with more capacity than the human brain.

If that which made humans special was attached to those brains, was it not possible to create a superhuman monster?

That was exactly what had happened here.

“Shundou Toshizou. You are the representative of the adults who once tracked down Deadlock and lent them those Queen Divers you acquired elsewhere to steal Mental Out even if it meant sacrificing Shokuhou Misaki. You are one of those who ignored ‘our’ plans. …You were supposedly killed in a past explosion like the others

, though. I must admit I am at least slightly surprised to find you had gathered the fragments of your brain and turned yourself into a monster."

"Ha ha. I'd say someone who achieved so much intelligence by expanding a purely canine brain is a lot more of a monster than someone based in a human brain. And I've never heard of a dog with a lifespan of eighty years."

"I doubt that samurai ant accomplished all that on her own. You were the one acting behind the scenes without her ever noticing, weren't you?"

"Why should I care if you know that!? What can a puppy like you do?"

"It would seem you do not understand what position I hold within the Kiharas."

"What, are you an assassin that can only wag at his owner?"

A tremendous sound burst out.

It sounded like the roar of jet engines and it came from a mass of two meters spheres that rolled in from the four

entrances located in a cross shape. Each one weighed over a ton, but they floated into the air using the powerful jets coming from the thirty-two deep holes covering them.

Those massive weights surrounded the large dog in no time.

"These are called Molar Teeth, but you can think of them like wrecking balls flying around without using a crane. They can be merely used as a massive weapon, they can be used to block bullets, and they're quite good at pouring mental pressure onto your enemy. Overall, they're quite useful."

"…"

"There are thirty in all. So what can the puppy that came to kill me do about this? Hm? You can go around breaking the water tank if you like, but that just means I can wield my own power as the king of the ocean."

"…"

"What, too scared to speak? Or are you hoping for reinforcements? I'll have to abandon this body thanks to you, but I can always transfer my brain over to a new one

. If I kill you, no one in Academy City will be able to capture me, so you need to die for my sake."

"I can't give this any better than a failing grade. I was actually a little hopeful when I chose my equipment, but it looks like that backfired."

The golden retriever narrowed his eyes ever so slightly .

And that was all it took.

A moment later, the giant water tank that truly covered the entire floor shattered.

"What!?"

The king of the ocean was not surprised by the glass shattering. Given how much water the facility contained, breaking the glass would only turn the floor into a giant pool. And if he attacked the dog with his killer whale body, he could kill him instantly.

However, something was missing.

That something was the seawater.

Shundou Toshizou was quickly having his movements sealed like a fish out of water.

"There's a hole in the outer wall?"

A dumbfounded voice came from the speakers.

The seawater was vanishing so quickly because it was flowing outside.

"Don't tell me fired on the building from outside!"

At that point, the killer whale's voice came to a stop.

Several impacts struck him and several giant containers stabbed into the floor around the golden retriever. They all opened as if creating geometric nets and the dog was rapidly surrounded by countless machines, arms, weapons, ammunition, and armor.

It went beyond arming him and reached the level of building a fortress around him.

With the sound of a dryer, the mountain of weapons floated few centimeters off the floor.

The excessive pile of military equipment did not form into a robotic silhouette. It simply fired and simply killed . That far too villainous concept was revealed in all its glory.

On top of that, the Molar Tooth assassins had been crushed from the moment the containers had flown in. Those thick spherical shields could deflect a shot from a tank's gun, but they had not stood a chance.

"What is that!?" groaned the king of the ocean who had been knocked into the air.

"All men love combining robots. Learn to appreciate it, young one."

His weapons included guns, cannons, swords, spears, missiles, lasers, flamethrowers, liquid nitrogen emitters, and even molecular vibration electromagnetic wave emitters. And on top of those countless weapons, a small arm moved to place a cigar in the golden retriever's mouth.

Yes.

Even within that great torrent of water, he successfully lit the cigar.

"No, not that! Why is the water moving out of the way to leave a perfect circle around you!?"

"Oh, that."

The large dog's blunt comment was accompanied by a puff of sweet vanilla-smelling smoke.

"The esper cyborg Rensa was created to crush the seven Level 5s in case they all rebelled against Academy City at once. My role is similar, but unfortunately, my target is not those homemade espers."

"Then…what is your target?"

"Ladylee Tangleroad, Fräulein Kreutune, and Codename Dragon."

"..?"

"Oh, was that too difficult for you? At any rate, I am the safety when it comes to *a realm that people like you could never comprehend*. Normally, I wouldn't need to deal with odd jobs like this."

A tremendous roar burst out.

The golden retriever's territory had only been a small circle around his large machine, but it quickly expanded. The water vanished and Shundou Toshizou's borrowed killer whale body was thrown to a truly empty floor.

"Putting it like this might make him upset."

It was like that king of the ocean was laid out on the chopping block.

And the chef who wielded great firepower spoke coldly while puffing on his cigar.

"Have you ever heard of the special powered suit called the **Anti-Art Attachment**?"[2]

A few minutes later, the golden retriever left the giant building and spotted the woman in a cheap suit and lab coat waiting among the crowd of onlookers while holding an umbrella.

"I thought I told you to wait somewhere else."

"Heh heh heh. Yeah, but I couldn't help myself."

They boldly left the scene of the crime without particularly worrying about all the people around them. Even if they were seen here and even if dog fur and pieces of flesh remained on that top floor, no one would think he had done it. As an animal, he lived outside the laws *that could only judge humans*.

"What time is it?"

"It's already four. How about getting a quick meal, sensei?"

"It would give me indigestion, so I would rather not. I may not look it, but I am an old dog."

"Nooo, you're a dandy gentleman!! I can't get enough of that voice!!"

"I sometimes have difficulty telling whether you're looking up to me or down on me. Either way, could you stop hugging my neck like that?"

As they spoke, the golden retriever sent a communication request that existed only in his head.

A hotline soon opened with the Windowless Building.

"Boo. Sensei, someone as important as you doesn't have to suck up to that guy."

"I appreciate your high opinion of me, but you are wrong. Besides, the Kiharas cannot defeat the ruler of this city."

"Oh, you mean because of the Archetype Controller? That's just cheating!"

Archetype was a psychological term for a common understanding or sense of values that developed as each member of a race or group dealt with an identical problem in the same way. These included religious concepts such as the palace of the gods being above the clouds and the prison for sinners being below the earth. In an extremely broad and shallow sense, the idea that

the Japanese loved rice and Americans loved burgers was an archetype.

But what if you could control those?

What if you could create them, send them out into the world, and even destroy them?

"He was the one that used the terms Academy City, esper, and science side and tossed them inside a framework that could be called mankind's worship of science. To go a step further, the category of the Kiharas is another example. That is why we cannot defeat this ruler. If he wanted to, he could cut us off from our surroundings using the archetype of heretical science and cause the very definition of our existence to vanish into thin air. We might manage to survive, but we would become defanged cowards. And I shouldn't have to explain what happens to a defanged and declawed beast that's thrown out into the wild."

(On top of that, he brought glory to the archetype of modern Western magic during the Golden period and it is still strongly influenced by him. He could always use that archetype to affect the very foundation of today's magic side.)

While keeping that part to himself, the large dog spoke to the person on the other end of the hotline.

He spoke to the city's ruler, Board Chairman Aleister.

"I'm sure you were spying with Underline, but I dealt with Shundou Toshizou. That's the last of the seventy-two requests you made. Every last one of those who grew *during your absence* and refused to regroup has been defeated. Are you satisfied with my work?"

"This is nothing more than the beginning."

"Have you found something to make up for what happened?" asked the golden retriever walking with Kihara Yuiitsu. "It was clearly a mistake to contact the Magic Gods at that point. Did you finally learn your lesson now that you have to recover from getting a third of your body burned so badly?"

"It was necessary regardless."

"You have a bad habit of sounding rational when you're actually handling everything through emotion."

"Scientists must be romantics and they must always work to fill people with dreams. Those are your words, I believe."

The golden retriever sighed at having that pointed out.

If he could change his expression like a human, he might have smiled.

"You're right. Romance is important. It is what separates the men from the beasts."

"Am I wrong?"

"How about you ask your *attending physician* instead of me? But if I had to give an answer from a Kihara perspective, it would definitely fall on the evil side of good and evil. Not only that, but it's a terribly bland sort of evil."

The dog looked up at the starry sky as he spoke.

Those mysterious lights filled the city's magazines as a symbol of astrology and other strange occult ideas unreachable with human science.

"But it would fall on the like side of like and dislike. It would seem even I have a heart."

The blazing colors of dawn filled the sky ahead of them.

The purple of that starry sky which symbolized the mysteries of the world was gradually dyed orange.

"I have now returned order to your rule, just as you asked."

The scientists spoke while facing that golden sunlight.

It looked like they were using human intellect to challenge the world's irrational side.

"Now, how about you use the power I have returned to you. Use it to destroy all those irregularities known as magic."

Afterword

If you bought each volume one by one, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Let's start with some inside information! This series was leaning pretty heavily toward the transcendent global magical battle centered on Othinus that ended last volume, so this story was mostly meant as a correction to bring things back into balance. That's why the topic was entirely science side and the battle would only resolve extremely personal problems no matter who won or lost. Basically, I turned the rudder in the exact opposite direction from the last couple of volumes.

And the protagonist this time was Shokuhou Misaki. I had actually planned out her past early on but later realized it would be difficult to actually use. However, I decided it would be a waste to never use it when I already had the idea, so I worked to reconstruct the story .

Shokuhou herself (much like Mikoto) is a difficult character to use because she's almost too convenient, but

after the personal breakthrough that was New Testament 9, I decided I could handle a tricky psychological battle using her and had her actually enter the fight this time.

Before, she was something like the other family's girl visiting Dengeki Bunko while Mikoto was staying over at Dengeki Daioh, so she had felt like a guest instead of an actual family member, but this might have broken free of that.

However, I thought the readers would be disappointed with a story that takes place entirely in the past, at least timeline-wise. Instead, I had Shokuhou pursuing "those days" along with the reader while afraid that her past may have changed. I was hoping to make a story that left you unsure what the truth was as the story progressed and I hope you found it thrilling.

As for the enemy character, Mitsuari Ayu, I actually used an initial rough for Shokuhou that Haimura-san submitted. I thought nothing could be more perfect for a girl who could not become Shokuhou and insisted that he use the design. I am truly grateful.

Her name means “honey ant” because there is a famous ant that gather so much sweet honey inside itself that it swells up like a ball and can’t walk on its own. (Its stomach grows translucent too, so it’s surprisingly pretty. It’s something like a glass ball.) I named her that because she first shows up in that three hundred kilogram form, because she filled herself with so many emotions that she couldn’t move, and because I wanted to include the character for “ant” to act as a counterpart for Shokuhou.

With Shokuhou, I initially wanted to give her family name a queen bee motif, but most everything I could think of there had already been used. I finally settled on her current family name with the idea that she eats into the entire societal structure and not just the queen at the top. I apologize to anyone who was shocked when they first saw a name meaning “bee eater”, but I did put some actual thought into it.

As for Shokuhou and Mitsuari’s given names meaning “control and pray” and “love and joy” respectively, you might be able to catch a glimpse of where their hearts lie and what their differences are by comparing them.

Both of them control people’s minds, but neither of them looks down on people’s minds or hearts.

Sometimes, they will risk their lives to fight for those things or start down the wrong path because of them. I wanted to write a story about girls like that.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san, my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anana-san, and for the first time, all of the Dengeki Daioh staff starting with Fuyukawa Motoi-san. I relied on a lot of people to flesh out what was nothing more than lines of text in the plot and eventually create the beloved character named Shokuhou Misaki. Without all of their help, I would never have finished this story centered on her. I am truly grateful.

I also give my thanks to the readers. As I already said, I wouldn't have given the go-sign for this story without the success I felt from New Testament 9 and this might have forever remained nothing but an idea in my notes. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for giving me the push I needed.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

But the connection between Kumokawa Seria and Kamijou Touma is still a mystery!

-Kamachi Kazuma

1. ↑ Mitsuari's name contains the character for ant and Shokuhou's name contains the character for bee.
2. ↑ **Kanji:** Anti-Magic-Type Powered Suit